

**EMBODIED WORLDS OF COLLECTIVE LOVE:
CRITICALLY RE-TURNING LIBERATION
IN MY BURMESE DISABLED POETRY**

YEMA YANG

Supervisor's Name: Rachel da Silveira Gorman

Advisor's Name: nancy viva davis halifax

Supervisor's Signature:

Date Approved:

Advisor's Signature:

Date Approved:

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ABSTRACT

In the West, the main options for approaching disability are usually as follows: attempt to fix your disability through medical solutions or take on a disability identity to access communities, resources, and beliefs that are alternative from the medical model. However, these limited options mean many are not only excluded from disability dialogue altogether, but also cannot access care, community, or agency in the same way—especially if they cannot readily mesh with white, Western, and individualistic ways of thinking. This means that Indigenous, Black, Brown, transnational, and immigrant communities and beyond are often erased, missing, and neglected in disability discourse. And yet we are here anyway, disabled and debilitated in more ways than one, regardless of whether we've been able to access white Western care around disability.

In my major research paper, I use my intersecting disabled Burmese experiences to highlight, honor, and nurture those non-Western ways of knowing and caring. I explore structural and relational perspectives of disability to move beyond identity-based disability, centering non-Western marginalized experiences and navigations of disability. As such, I excavate how communal love enables Burmese disabled existences and occasions of liberation. Using myself as a sample, I engage in critical autoethnographic poetic inquiry and a diffractive lens as a methodology for reflecting and honoring the fruition of my Burmese disabled self as it is born from communities. Ultimately, I inquire how the collectively-created self can create and house an intimate and political space of communal love to foster existence and collective liberation with others.

Key terms: Burmese disability, disability justice, disablement, relational disability, collectivity, community, critical autoethnographic poetic inquiry, diffraction, liberation, love

DEDICATION

For all disabled Burmese people—whether you name it disability or not.

This one is for us.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, this major research paper is a celebration and honoring of the Burmese Buddhist and disabled communities that constitute “me” and that have allowed “me” to exist as I currently am. TBSA, LETS (special shout-out to Stefanie Kaufman, my first rad disabled comrade and aspiration), and DJAB (special shout-out to Malana Krongelb, my fellow disabled co-founder and visionary): you are sewn into the fabric of my being, and I hope to wave the love you have embroidered here unapologetically and tenderly. I hope this paper provides you with even a sliver of the resonance, validation, and connection that you have given me. In academia, art, activism—I can’t wait to share more of you wherever I go.

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I owe the roots of my work's pivot into Burmese disability to my partner's family back home in Myanmar. Despite visiting over three years ago, I am still basking in their abundant, unconditional love and care. Aunties and cousins, I hope my work makes the world freer for you and others the way you made it freer for me.

To my family—extended and immediate—I am all-encompassingly grateful for all of you. You are the first village I have known. To my aunts, uncles, and grandparents: thank you for raising me like your own—cooking for me, driving me places, and welcoming me in your open arms always. To my cousins: thank you for growing up with me, for being my extended siblings, and for proving how brilliant and loving our

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HOW TO READ THIS MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

While the Table of Contents seems to linearly lay out my major research paper, that is only one way this major research paper (MRP) can be read. **I invite you to read this paper however best serves you**—that can mean reading linearly, but it can also mean reading only one section, jumping from section to section, reading only the poetry collections in the appendices, and so on. To facilitate this exploration, I made all subsection titles and poem titles hyperlinked in the Table of Contents so you may easily teleport from idea to idea or just beeline to whichever part(s) call to you.

Academia often insists we think linearly and orderly, as seen in the convention that knowledge and theory are best captured in prose. However, this Western, elitist norm leaves out so much lived, collective wisdom from marginalized communities that may not be able to access these jargon-filled academic spheres and/or be considered valid knowledge-makers due to nonverbalized or alternatively verbalized conveying of ideas.

To challenge and expand beyond this, I have created poetry versions of my major research paper in the form of a condensed poetry collection ([Appendix A](#)) and an extended poetry collection ([Appendix B](#)). I intend these poetry collections to capture the essence of my major research paper, though presented in a more feel-thinking, raw, immersive, and visceral way. Simultaneously, these collections work to complement the prose version of my MRP. As such, **reading either/both of these poetry collections is equivalent to reading my prose research paper**, so I invite you to feel your way through my ideas via my poetry if that feels best for you. Along those lines, you do not have to read the collections in their entirety—please visit whichever poems stick out to

you because you are probably gravitating toward them for a reason. Reading even one poem or one section is an entirely valid way of engaging with this paper, so please read this paper at your own pace, on your own terms.

Please note that this paper will engage with potentially triggering topics such as, but not limited to: white supremacy, colonialism, fascism, epistemic violence, racism, ableism, fatphobia, misogyny and more. I have included more specific content warnings for poems that delve into these topics. For the prose, the subtitles are detailed and indicative of the type of content that will be discussed. Please use these content warnings and titles to help you navigate this work, and please take care to hold yourself however you need.

INTRODUCTION

The Political Economy of Disability Understanding & Who's Left Behind

Disability in the West—North America, Europe, and Australia—is often held in two contrasting frameworks within mainstream consciousness and academia: the medical model of disability and the social model of disability. The former entails a biomedical perspective locating the problem to be fixed within individual bodies; this is the widespread viewpoint fueling approaches in realms such as rehabilitation, psychiatry, Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), and general medicine. Fueled by ableism, this viewpoint understands disabled bodies as less valuable and desirable than non-disabled bodies.

On the other hand, the social model of disability pinpoints societal barriers as the issue to be tackled rather than individual impairments. Often situated as the opposition to the biomedical model, this social model is more frequently adopted by disability activists and scholars, in part to protest the ableist and neoliberal responsabilization encompassed in the medical model. Proponents of the social model largely overlap with the portion of the disability community that aligns with the Disability Pride movement and who unapologetically perceive their disability through an identity-based lens. Especially in Western academia or social justice, discourse and activism tend to rely on the concept of disability identity to engender social change around disabled people's human rights, pride, and liberation. However, this perspective on disability is hardly universally applicable across the world and does not necessarily take into consideration the political economy of disability identity. Not every person from every culture and intersection can

take identity with disability—and frankly, they shouldn't have to for support, belonging, or justice.

In short, in the West, the main options for approaching disability are usually as follows: attempt to fix your disability through medical solutions or take on a disability identity to access communities, resources, and beliefs that are alternative from the medical model. However, these limited options mean many are not only excluded from disability dialogue altogether, but also cannot access care, community, or agency in the same way—especially if they cannot readily mesh with white, Western, and individualistic ways of thinking. This means that Indigenous, Black, Brown, transnational, and immigrant communities and beyond are often erased, missing, and neglected in disability discourse. And yet we are here anyway, disabled and debilitated in more ways than one, regardless of whether we've been able to access white Western care around disability.

In my major research paper, I use my intersecting disabled Burmese experiences to highlight, honor, and nurture those non-Western ways of knowing and caring. I explore structural and relational perspectives of disability to move beyond identity-based disability, centering non-Western marginalized experiences and navigations of disability. As such, I excavate how communal love enables Burmese disabled existences and occasions of liberation. Using myself as a sample, I engage in critical autoethnographic poetic inquiry and a diffractive lens as a methodology for reflecting and honoring the fruition of my Burmese disabled self as it is born from communities. Ultimately, I inquire

how the collectively-created self can create and house an intimate and political space of communal love to foster existence and collective liberation with others.

Disability Justice Framework: Structural and Relational Disability

My poetry means more than a confession, reflection, or representation of my personal experience. In fact, it alludes to embodied knowledge beyond my own knowledge; it is reminiscent or potentially indicative of other lived experiences within my marginalized communities. My research thus relies on a conceptual framework that intertwines disability justice; structural understandings of disability; the non-self and collective; and poetry as collective microcosms, love, and liberation.

One of the overarching conceptual frameworks my research is built on is disability justice. Named and created by disabled queer women of color in the United States—Patty Berne, Mia Mingus, and Stacey Milbern—to build beyond the legal framework of the disability rights movement that frequently left out multiply marginalized disabled people, this framework centers various systems of oppression as they categorize people's bodyminds as invalid (Project LETS, n.d.; Sins Invalid, 2020). While my research is generally enfolded within a disability justice praxis, it especially utilizes and explores the disability justice principles of intersectionality, recognizing wholeness, interdependence, and collective liberation (Sins Invalid, 2015). These principles create the fertile grounds that root the rest of my research's theoretical approach.

From a disability justice perspective, we can understand disability as existing beyond disability identity or individual disability housed by a singular bodymind. This

stems partially from an application of intersectionality—which allows us to understand the world as it is made of disabling, oppressive forces—as well as the application of collective liberation, which proclaims that no body or mind will be left behind in this revolutionary work. From these principles, it is clear that disability can have definitions, embodiments, and consequences that exist outside of a Western individual and identity-based context. Thus, instead of individual disability or disability identity, we can also think about disability from a structural and relational perspective.

A structural understanding of disability places disability as a result of larger systems of oppression instead of only an apolitical and blameless tragedy, accident, or coincidence. Rachel Gorman's (2016) interpretation of disablement illuminates how entire communities and countries are disabled because of structural violence like war, poverty, capitalism, fascism, and more. Put differently, it elucidates the sociopolitical circumstances involved in the construction and adoption of contemporary ideas of disability identity. It expresses the way disability is twisted, exacerbated, erased, constituted, and so on depending on your social location; it is the sociopolitical context determining how your disability emerges as well as how it is or is not perceived, cared for, or worthy of benefits. Rather than disability being an apolitical, self-evident constant (x), disablement allows us to think about the sociopolitical context that determines disability experiences as a function of social relations ($f(x)$). As such, disablement expands the realm of disability to center “people who are not afforded access to disability as identity” (R. Gorman, personal communication, June 12, 2023). It thus complicates the apolitical vacuum that disability is frequently situated in and challenges the “ongoing re-

constitution of the disabled subject as a white subject,” especially in a colonial and state context (Gorman, 2016, 254).

Similarly, Jasbir Puar (2017) presents us with the concept of debilitation (see also: Livingston, 2005) wherein a person is neither able-bodied nor disabled yet is still unable to fulfill neoliberal labor. This process “foregrounds the slow wearing down of populations instead of the event of becoming disabled” and thus also makes room for those with bodymind impairments or functional deviations who do not align with disability language or identity (xiii). While compatible with the concept of disablement, because debilitation “refers more to population level techniques of the state” rather than stemming from problems with disability identity, I will be focusing on disablement as the main example of structural disability for the remainder of my paper (R. Gorman, personal communication, June 12, 2023).

Breaking away further from Western ideas of disability, disability also exists in a relational context that may or may not be recognized as disability. For example, in *Curative Violence*, Eunjung Kim (2017) introduces cure of disability as a site of transformation to align more with societal norms and enact national postcolonial rehabilitation. She highlights cure as a collective goal or duty of the family, not only signifying morality of the family, but also the virtue of individuals involved in relation to the disability. This emphasizes the influence and proposed “solution” for disability—cure—as an entity existing deeply in the relations between people and in the context of gender and culture. Disability thus holds relational meaning, both in terms of oppression and liberation. While Kim focuses on relationality in terms of the family dynamic, I will

be focusing on relationality in terms of broader community, wherein one may or may not be biologically related to others.

Object-Becoming and a Diffractive Lens: Deconstructing the Western “Self”

Given that disability has structural and relational implications, in this MRP, I will be equipping the theoretical approach of object-becoming and diffraction of the self to map such meanings within me. Eunjung Kim (2015) presents object-becoming as the nature of becoming a “quasi-object” wherein one takes on the “characteristics of objects, perceives one’s body or body parts as objects, or suspends what are conventionally viewed as uniquely human capacities and values” (296). In other words, to become an object is to un-become human and let go of attaching worth according to capacity, productivity, and subjectivity. In my case, I will use object-becoming to deconstruct my ego and detach from the Western individualistic idea of the “self” by seeing myself less as a person with totally distinct will and emotions. With this, there is space to center my relationality with community and existence as a collective manifestation of the communities I come from.

From there, I utilize Karen Barad’s (2014) concept of diffraction to reframe my “self” as an ongoing, ever-changing result of past, present, and future solidifications of community. Diffraction troubles distinction between self and other through its nature of dynamism, allowing us to understand “that identity is not essence, fixity or givenness, but a contingent iterative performativity” (Barad, 2014, 173-174). This means that who we are and how we present depends on the context, creating a “material multiplicity of self, the way it is diffracted across spaces, times, realities, imaginaries” (175). Diffraction thus

interrupts this idea of a singular, static self, instead underscoring it as “a superposition of beings, becomings, here and there’s, now and then’s” (176). As such, the self can be composed of more than our own bodymind—the “me” you see is more than just “me”, and “my” world is more than just “my” world. In fact, if we understand my “self” as a product of collectivity, then a diffracted understanding of the self is that multiple communities are simultaneously and overlappingly constructing “me.” Rather than hold my “self” as a separate entity from my communities, I use diffraction to blur that categorical distinction and locate my communities *within* and *throughout* “me” as they and their communal love are and have been shaped into my marginalized existence.

If my “self” is made up of interlaced communities, then my personal experiences with violence and healing have meaning beyond their impact on “me.” Through autoethnographic poetry, those experiences extend beyond a raw reveal of my personal experiences. Rather, they offer a multilayered look at how my poetry is indicative of collective microcosms, love, and liberation that constitute me and enable me to be here. This methodology follows in the footsteps and builds off of Jenna Reid’s (2019) dissertation, *Materializing a Mad Aesthetic Through the Making of Politicized Fibre Art*, which utilizes craft as a place of outward knowledge production and community engagement. In that way, my poetry also acts as a crystallization of communal knowledge and site for marginalized connection.

My Intervention: Burmese Disabled Poetry

With this conceptual framework, my major research paper (MRP) seeks to investigate the following questions: how does communal love enable Burmese disabled

existences and occasions of liberation? How does my poetry reflect and honor the fruition of my Burmese disabled self as it is born from communal love, and how can the collectively-created self offer an intimate and political space of communal love to foster existence and collective liberation with others? By interlacing collectivity with politics, poetry, love, and liberation, these questions guide my research to be critical, connective, and change-making.

Because I am utilizing myself as the main data source and author of this research, I would like to contextualize my positionality and its significance to this work. I am a queer, mentally ill, autistic, disabled, and Theravāda Buddhist Chinese-Burmese American woman and child of immigrants currently studying in Canada. Whenever I reference my disabilities, I am referring to my mental illnesses—Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), pure-O OCD, Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD), unspecified eating disorder (hypergymnasia¹), body dysmorphia, dermatillomania (skin-picking disorder)—and my autism.

My dual ethnicity of being both Chinese (Hokkien) and Burmese (Bamar/Burman²) has complicated entanglements in terms of marginalization. Within Myanmar's ethnically diverse country, Chinese-Burmese people make up but a small minority of its population. Mya Than (1997) estimated that only 2-3% (900,000-1.4

¹ Also called “anorexia athletica,” “obligatory exercise,” and a slew of other names, hypergymnasia is an unofficial eating disorder not included in the Diagnostic Statistics Manual (DSM). It describes an obsession with exercise that is compulsive and centered around using exercise to control weight and body image (Adrienne, 2014).

² “Bamar/Burman” refers to the ethnic group while “Burmese” refers to the being a citizen of Myanmar (Harvard Divinity School, n.d.). The Bamar people are Myanmar's ethnic majority, constituting 68% of the population (Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 2023).

million) consisted of Chinese-Burmese people while Egreteau and Jagan (2013) estimated this percentage to be 3-5% (2-3 million). Even so, considering both these estimations are 10-25 years old and may not include the many Chinese migrant workers living there, it is difficult to assert a more precise and updated statistic; this is especially the case since Myanmar lacks reliable census methods and houses ambiguities around the definition of Chineseness (Harvard Divinity School, n.d.; Egreteau & Jagan, 2013, 274). As with many other nonindigenous communities, Chinese-Burmese people in Myanmar have historically been regarded as perpetually suspicious foreigners (Roberts, 2016). Even so, within the past few decades, the Chinese-Burmese have emerged as part of the middle class alongside the Indian-Burmese (Egreteau & Jagan, 2013). This economic advantage is undoubtedly connected to how most of the Burmese population in California's Bay Area—where I grew up and hold permanent residence in—are Chinese-Burmese, educated, and middle or upper class (Cheah, 2011, 83).

As such, while I hold many marginalizations, I also hold class and educational privilege that have allowed me to write these words before you. This is key because the median income for Burmese people in America (\$44,400) is almost half of that for all Asians (\$85,800), and the post-high school educational attainment of Burmese people is 35% compared to the 73% of all Asians (Budiman, 2021). Put simply, my upper middle class and college-educated background mean I hold privileges that most of my Burmese American kin do not, especially relative to those who are ethnic or religious minorities and/or refugees. While this does not negate my own experiences of oppression and violence, I want to highlight these intersectionalities to emphasize that my own

experiences as described in this paper cannot and should not be representative of the entire Burmese American diaspora. Simultaneously, I underscore these intersections to contextualize why Burmese perspectives in academia and beyond are so scarce and thus why it is that much more crucial this paper focuses on the disabled Burmese experience.

Accordingly, my research is meant to center the intersecting Burmese and disabled communities often neglected in research and mainstream consciousness, though it may be extended to reflect the experiences of other marginalized communities. I aspire for my research to allow disabled Burmese people to re-turn—a repeated turning over of multiple, simultaneous processes (Barad, 2014). I want them to re-turn in their own worlds, in my worlds, in the worlds that make up our worlds, and gain whatever it is they most need from that re-turning process. My research seeks to explore what it means to be made up of different worlds and to co-create our own safe, emancipatory one while dismantling and reworking the one(s) that extinguishes us. It is also a political act of love meant to affirm, uplift, and allow my communities and others in their respective existences that are otherwise smothered by systemic oppression and structural violence. It is a disruption, critique, pivot, riot, all while being a connection, validation, embrace, invitation. My research is a collective love and liberation that I have received and hope to re-turn with others so they feel like they can exist too.

My MRP will first detail my autoethnographic critical poetic inquiry methodology. Following that, it will lay out my poetry by theme—oppression and violence, and then liberation and love. It will then include reflection and analysis of my poetry. Finally, it will end with concluding remarks on the meaning of my poetry as part

of a larger movement for collective liberation. In the appendices, I include alternate versions of my MRP in the form of condensed and extended poetry collections. These collections stand on their own but also complement this prose version of my MRP.

METHODOLOGY

The Power of Poetry

[P]oetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action ... The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives. (Lorde, 1977, 1)

Western society champions rationalism—financial and social capital gravitate into science, technology, engineering, business, and the like. In comparison, arts such as poetry are interpreted as whimsical and frivolous fields. But poetry isn't a cheap parlor trick of meaning. As Lorde states, it is crucial—indispensable—because it is a form of “light,” a canvas for our feelings, our worlds, and our dreams (1). In the academic and capitalist reality that prizes positivist logics above all, poetry may seem cavalier or shallow compared to supposedly objective facts, numbers, and statistics. However, a place to convey and share our experiences and hopes is what can connect and galvanize us. It lets us forge bonds with one another and envision possibilities for change and different futures. Even so, if poetry isn't a luxury as Lorde states, then what else is it? In face of ineffable terror, of the world increasingly collapsing for marginalized people, how

could my poetry possibly provide any type of solace, resistance, or solidarity for disabled Burmese people? How could *my* poetry pave a way for transforming worlds?

Poetic Inquiry: Poetry as Research

Poetic inquiry frames poetry as research, turning research data, analysis, reflections, and lived experience into poetry, “offer[ing] a way to critique power structures, offer alternative views, and advocate for social justice” (Cloud and Faulkner, 2019, xii). It describes a level of approachability, relatability, and accessibility more present in poetry than in prose. It insists on poetry as theory and evidence, fortifying “textual spaces that invite and create ways of knowing and becoming in the world” (Leggo, 2008, 167). It showcases poetry as a relational process, simultaneously calling and connecting, “stitch[ing] passion to other, be it the beloved, place, or politics” (Fidyk, 2019, 26).

Using poetic inquiry, how could I divest from Western individualist values and deconstruct my “self” as a single ego and instead recognize my “self” as a knitted quilt of others? As a landscape created by the tectonic plates, oceans, volcanic magma of various communities I belong to? As a body sharing the narratives of these stitched inter-beings?

One crucial way poetry serves as a social justice response is its reclamation of knowledge production. Instead of being confined to the positivist and rationalistic logics of prose, poetry relies on imagery, subjectivity, and ambiguity. As Leggo (2008) mentions, “[p]oetry ... creates or makes the world in words” (166). He goes on to detail poetry as the experience itself, acting as an openness rather than a closing and a question rather than an answer. It is a process—a verb, rather than a noun. Furthermore, it is not

just about what you say, but about how you say it; it is through the flavor, the texture, the negative space, the pauses, the speed, that “[p]oetry creates textual spaces that invite and create ways of knowing and becoming in the world” (167). In writing poetry, how do I create space for those in and outside my disabled Burmese communities to resonate, feel affirmed, gain relational courage, and pursue their own definition of liberation? What does it mean to be radically transparent in my intersectional lived experiences and unapologetically take up knowledge-making space with my marginalizations?

The Personal is Political: An Autoethnographic Critical Poetic Inquiry Methodology

Autoethnographic poetic inquiry is grounded in autoethnography, wherein the researcher is also the researched and their personal experiences link to larger sociopolitical issues (Zhang, 2021; Phan, 2023). Thus, poetry I’ve written covering my lived experiences will not only be used in a collective context but will also reflect structural violence and liberation.

Critical poetic inquiry differs from poetic inquiry by how it equips “poetic devices to critically analyze a research inquiry” for the sake of justice, often generating research poetry as a result (Davis, 2021, 116). This is key for resisting and deviating from hegemonic white, Western, and Eurocentric academic norms as well as recognizing “all research is political and this truth is merely heightened for minoritized researchers ... who live and work daily in politicized bodies” (121). My research methodology hinges on this political aspect of marginalization and justice, thus situating my work squarely in critical poetic inquiry rather than only poetic inquiry.

Poetry as Embodied and Relational Spaces

Within this methodology, I emphasize the relationality of poetry and how poems are embodied, relational spaces that bridge people, feelings, and visions. In fact, Fidyk (2019) notes the inherent relational nature of poetry: “Poetry has always stitched passion to other, be it the beloved, place, or politics. Poetry keeps us in relation” (26). Fidyk goes on to discuss how trauma, which can arise from oppression and violence, as losing connection with something and how “those who become displaced or exiled ... [are] people who have lost their connection to land, language, culture, and family” (26-27). However, they suggest that one can heal from trauma by regaining that connection via relationality, “reflecting interconnectedness, empathy, humility, and care” (27). My poetry can be one way others and I may regain that connection to people, places, times, and hopes in terms of expressing, relating, sharing, and embracing. In this way, I investigate my poetry’s capacity for disabled Burmese healing from and within disablement.

Fidyk (2019) also offers insight on using poetry to map out embodied knowledge through relationality. Their research project, “Poetics of the Body,” supported students’ body image by “poetically story[ing] their lives via a life-size body map” (17). This project relied on and was inspired by an Indigenous framework called the animated paradigm, which is:

the ancestral home of *ispoesis*, a realm that supports a return to the imaginal and poetic basis of consciousness ... reflect[ing] a worldview that includes and values images, intuition, imagination, feeling, the unconscious, transpersonal, transgenerational, transgender, imaginal, and emergent dimensions. (19)

As such, the poetic maps in the research depended on the participants' "imagination that arises autonomously through relationship with the creative pulse of existence—images that appear ... via intuition, instinct, the body, and the not-yet-conscious" (18). This Indigenous concept of following one's instinct, images, and whatever else the body-in-relation comes up with leads me to also wonder: what would my poetry look like if I followed that visceral knowledge? What would my poetry say?

Indigenous poet-scholar Margaret McKeon (2019) offers more insight on the connection between embodied knowledge and relationality:

We exist in webs of relationships: with ourselves, with other people, and the-more-than human; with ideas and places; with the past, present, and future. What I believe counts as knowledge defines how I identify and know my relationships and therefore name as my responsibilities. Understanding knowledge as the domain supremely of cognitive thought produces much different personal and communal networks of relationships and responsibilities than when I am able to value also bodily, emotional, and intuitive-spiritual knowing. (59)

In other words, my "self" is not a standalone unit—I am a single point in a larger network of people, concepts, moments. Summed up, it is as Walt Whitman wrote in 1855: "i am large, i contain multitudes" (78). As McKeon says, defining and valuing knowledge beyond the cerebral by validating embodied and subjective knowledge generates a different perspective on relationality and the responsibilities embedded in that. Thus, like McKeon, I utilize my autoethnographic critical poetic inquiry as a "pedagogy of coming to know myself deeply, so that I can be of better service to my relationships of ideas, places, and people ... mapping my interior landscapes as a key to understanding external ones" (62).

World-Making and World Re-Turning: Lyric Inquiry and Diffraction

Within poetic inquiry, lyric inquiry applies poetic aesthetics to resonate personal experiences, possibilities, and politics through world immersion. This includes any “nonrationalist writing” like journals, narrative, or poetry to discuss an issue (Neilsen, 2008, 96). In this way, under lyric inquiry, writing acts not in service of facts, but of “illumination and connection,” where knowledge “is an experience of immersion and expression rather than one of gathering data only to advance an argument” (96). It relies heavily on “liminality, ineffability, metaphorical thinking, embodied understanding, personal evocations ... the desire to honor and experience phenomena through words ... and to communicate this experience to others” (94). As such, lyric inquiry transcends disciplines and instead sits in phenomenological thinking. Furthermore, it marks poetry as “embodied language: the self (and selves) of our personal landscapes embodied in aesthetic forms of writing” (95), meaning that it can indeed map out the self through words.

However, the key to lyric inquiry is in its world-making. It focuses on “transporting a reader into a world” and exiting with “the resonance of another’s world” (96). By immersing a person into their world, the lyric inquirer focuses on sharing their experiences rather than making a singular point. It is about feeling, seeing, processing, as the lyric inquirer has and possibly beyond that. Neilsen (2008) cites Zwicky’s (1992) analogy that “analysis is a laser; lyric is a bell” and how lyric inquiry’s ability for resonance is made possible from its nebulosity (100).

If lyric inquiry is a matter of creating the world, then diffracting is a matter of moving inside that world. More specifically, diffraction entails “re-turning” in that world,

a repeated turning over “as a multiplicity of processes” like how a worm would be “turning the soil over and over—ingesting and excreting it, tunnelling through it, burrowing, all means of aerating the soil, allowing oxygen in, opening it up and breathing new life into it” (Barad, 2014, 168). Because diffraction also blurs the categorical difference between self and other, it allows me to frame my “self” as comprised of others and their worlds. Through poetry, then, I am “re-turning” in my “self” and my world—questioning it, uncovering it, navigating it, nurturing it—all at once. And, when others read my poetry, I aim for them to be able to “re-turn” in their own ways inside my world, their worlds, and the fluid overlap of both.

My Poetry as Collective Love and Liberation

Clearly, my poetry goes beyond me. Rather than a pure confession of my “self,” it is grounded in an autoethnographic critical poetic inquiry framework where my poetry embodies collectivity as it appears *through* me. My poetry is theory, as condensed from the knowledge of my ancestors and communities. It is relational—a form of inviting, accompanying, and connecting. It is a landscape of my “self” as it is constituted by and constitutes others. But this framework is far from apolitical; instead, my poetics—how I write my poems, how they take form—are simultaneously my politics, and vice versa. Just as my poetry embodies me and the collectives that make me up, it also takes up the inter-workings of our oppression, trauma, liberation, and love.

Within that framework, my poetry equips both lyric inquiry and diffraction as a methodology to explore, honor, affirm, and share the collective landscape of my “self.” The former allows me to share embodied knowledge through metaphor, bringing the

audience into my world and the worlds that construct it. The latter allows me to diffract that entrance—that arrival, visitorship, accompaniment. It's not simply walking through and being in awe; while I am grappling and re-turning in my world(s), the reader is simultaneously burrowing through with their own world(s), engaging with what is offered from mine, and being in kinship as we share between ours. Meanwhile, diffraction also describes my “self,” illustrating the fluidity of my world and its constitution of multiple collective worlds.

Consequently, my poetry draws on collective love and collective liberation—love that is given and received from others as well as liberation we strive for and are concurrently able to enact our own part of. Put differently, my poetry transcends individualistic love, imbuing it with the accumulation of love from others. It also is in service of collective liberation, which I believe is and should be the goal for all social movements so that all people can be free in their own bodyminds and lives to meet their needs and dreams on their own terms. Yet is it only a lofty goal that can finally be checked off one day? Or is it a praxis that we can act on, slowly but surely, in small-big ways in our day-to-day? Does collective liberation only live in the finish lines of social justice causes or can we hold parts of it in the less macro, but not diminishable, pockets of our daily lives? In the realm of my poetry, I want to explore what this collective love and liberation can look like—for me, my communities, and any marginalized people who reads my poetry. I want us to keep working toward collective love and liberation as ambitions, but I also want us to feel and live them at the same time.

In this way, I aim for my poems to build a site of invitation. Rather than being a borderland—as Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) would say—that lies between artificially constructed borders, my poetry endeavors as an open meadow where people may come sit on my picnic blanket and converse with the communities living within me. It is where the breeze, people’s feet, and birds all make ripples in the puddles on the ground. It is where laughter and tears and warmth reverberate. It is where we accompany each other. It is a collective show-and-tell where I showcase the parts of my “self” that are made up of more than me and where others feel shown in that too. I illustrate this sentiment through the world immersion and village metaphor of this poem:

the village that grows me up

Content Warning: colonialism, epistemic violence, anti-Asian racism, fetishization

soft blue sky.
 comforter clouds float hand-in-hand.
 the sun holds sunshine above us like an umbrella,
 making sure we are protected and nestled
 by its warm breaths.
 the air is perfumed with fresh laundry:
 crisp, clean, sweet.

we walk on the dirt road,
 paved well by feet that wanted
 to protect the grass.
 you haven’t been here before,
 haven’t seen those mountainscapes,
 those rice fields or types of wildflowers.
where is the pollution?
the noise? the blaring lights?
 i laugh and tell you
out here,
it is quiet and safe and freeing.

i take you house to house,

introducing you to the people who raised me,
 who fought alongside me,
 who embraced me even in my unknown.
 i regale you with childhood stories,
 war stories,
 love stories,
 as we are fed the sweet and savories
 of unconditional care.

then i show you the places
 where white robbers had scorched down our crops
 and made the soil into char
 and poisoned the river
 we all got our water from.
 where medical quacks talked over me
 and crushed me into dust.
 where englishmen gagged at my food
 and then objectified me in the same breath.
 where i kept secrets and myself hidden
 because my body didn't seem good enough
 because my body didn't seem bad enough
 because my body didn't seem enough.

i can see the tears in your eyes
 maybe because you felt it too
 but don't you worry—
 i'm about to show you
 where everyone came in
 and helped me heal too.
 after all, i've shown you only a peek
 of this world of mine,
 and the village that grows me up.

Beyond an answer, my poetry seeks to open, honor, and embrace the collectives within me and make a place of loving-kindness where others can engage in whatever way they need or can for their own sense of liberation. This could look like mirroring what they see in my world(s) to simply visiting and soaking in possibility with no other action but existing. In my poetics and politics, I want to soar into what it means to be made up

of different worlds and to co-create our own safe, emancipatory one while dismantling and reworking the one(s) that extinguishes us.

My poetry is a venture into nurturing “my” truths as they were born from the fertile earth of my communities. It is wholly me, but it also wholly not me either. It is fighting in order to love and loving in order to fight. My poetry is a fruit of relationality, a communally-mustered courage that could not exist without the communities that have poured care into me. And because of that, my poetry is a growing space of collective love and liberation.

A GLIMPSE OF OUR WORLDS IN MY BURMESE DISABLED POETRY

Violence on my Bodymind: Pieces of Our Oppression

made for

Content Warning: white supremacy, eating disorder, body dysmorphia

i've got it easy, i've got it good
 hardship is surely not a boat i know
 and sinking in the sea is a faraway woe
 light skin, relatively thin
 upper middle class, white proximity pass
 my asian ass has it made in
 the white Western glance:
 i have it made—
 i was made
 in china,
 in burma,
 and sold in America,
 fit into boxes and exported
 to sell well in meritocracy scams
 marketing this shitty land,
 the narrative of the resilient hand,

the story of “even they can”,
all for the white supremacy plan

i have it made, i was made
and the world
was surely made for me

i'm a fake doll with no space
tolerated when i leave no trace
because don't i comply just fine?
in the asian race i'm just another face—
korean? japanese? chinese?
i'm an ad that won't clarify
in the Western eye,
just another light-skinned, shy,
erased burmese sight;
it's my fault
burma is summed up
in exotic cuisine
or the military regime
it's my fault
no one knows we're suffering
that our margins
aren't lined with dreaming

i have it made, i was made
and the world
was surely made for me

on the DSM production line,
i am a throwaway defective
whose eating disorder
puts me in “miscellaneous”—
i do not look right
for the white recovery wish
my obsessive exercise
is but a healthy habit
my body dysmorphia
is just self-awareness
and surely not molding myself
to be a skinny asian miss,
to be pretty and valuable,
to be femininely fuckable,
to be finally desirable

it's my fault
 my body is like this
 it's my fault
 i am the wrong kind of fit

i have it made, i was made
 and the world
 was surely made for me

finally made as diverse enough
 but not so different,
 i am shipped out to white neighborhoods
 where my proximity to power
 turns my "could" into "would"
 my "would" into "should"
 and i should be grateful
 my foreign skin gets to live
 that i'm held safe with my kin
 that my time in the factory
 will amount to something
 it's my fault
 people of color aren't here
 and are gated out of existence
 it's my fault
 money comes with whiteness
 that i am on the wrong side of the fence

i have it made, i was made
 and the world
 was surely made for me

i was made in china and burma
 only to be exported for the white Western agenda
 my light skin is close enough
 and my thinness could use some work,
 my money proves it's not luck,
 and my asianness is a bonus quirk
 but in the backrooms of white storefronts,
 i am made out as an overseas maiden minx:
 pure and corrupting,
 worthy if i'm prostrating,
 in need of white dominating.
 it's my fault
 i'm in this position

that whiteness is the mission
 it's my fault
 i uphold these conditions
 i survive with these decisions

i have it made, i was made
 but the world
 wasn't made for me

trophy case asphyxiation

Content Warning: epistemic violence

the model minority myth likes to make me forget
 that being asian makes me a dressed up target,
 that white people pin up my face
 and love to put me in their fancy trophy case—
 a transparent and asphyxiating place

exotic trophies don't need help, you know
 and that's why i should've known
 when i asked my white therapist
 i'd confided to all summer
 about my mental illnesses
 for his psychiatric verification
 so i could get needed accommodations
 but even when i pleaded
 even when i sobbed on the phone,
 he told me in a hollow sympathetic tone,
 "i'm sorry, i can't sign
 i think you'll be fine"

and exotic trophies don't know themselves
 because they're just arranged on high shelves,
 so when i told another white therapist
 that i thought i was autistic
 and wanted to get tested,
 i shouldn't have been surprised
 when she asked me why
 and i had to prove myself with evidence
 like i hadn't been in my body all my life,
 and even when i spread
 piece after piece of my truths,

she frowned and firmly said,
 “i don’t think you’re autistic,
 and i don’t think you need to be tested”

so if you’re wondering why
 i went without accommodations for months
 i don’t have an official autistic diagnosis
 you can look to the white gaze
 that keeps me in a glass case
 where i cannot be human,
 where i cannot be accommodated,
 where i cannot believe myself,
 where i cannot be

Knitted Love: Reverberating Liberation

our bonfire refuge

foggy, chilling
 slate shores
 engulf me.
 the sun is hard to spy
 behind forsaken skies.
 light diffuses,
 confused,
 like me.
 oppressive gusts
 cut my skin,
 crush my ribs,
 crack my lips.
 maybe gray days
 are the world’s way
 of saying go away.
 i’m not sure
 how to stay.

but the fog goes
 when embers glow
 in a makeshift bonfire
 for us outliers.
 faces lit up,
 no questions asked—

out
 by the moon
 of my bodymind,
 they follow the cosmic swirls in the air
 and chase the stars
 even when the sky's bare.
 they like to nap
 when the sun is shining
 because she is so warm
 with her daylight hair,
 and they splash more excitedly
 when people
 dip their feet in
 and are not scared of them
 for once.

 sometimes i'll go to the edge
 and they'll be so low
 that they can barely
 creep up to the ground.
 there will be dams
 on their waterfall origins
 and some ableist trash
 they accidentally swallowed.
 it wasn't their fault though,
 was it?

 sometimes they break loose
 and go
 beyond their bounds
 into the lives of others—
 tsunamis and hurricanes
 storm in
 with pain in tow,
 and my tears
 mix in with
 their salt water because
 i see exactly who
 they sweep up
 in their flow,
 in their loneliness
 and
 sorrow.

but if memory serves me correctly,
 they are just
 a part of nature,
 they are
 what they are
 what they are
 what they are—
 can my earth really be mine without them?
 in their tide pools, i find
 habitats of care:
 small little worlds
 unto themselves,
 with their own niches
 and synergies.
 can they really exist without the tides?

gazing off at where
 the water
 meets the sand,
 i don't leave because
 the ocean's roaring
 is my air conditioner hum
 and the shifty beach under my feet
 shows me how to understand
 outside of rigidity.
 i make damp sandcastles out of
 autistic shutdowns
 and eating disorder flares—
 an ode to surviving another day,
 a celebration of all that i can make here.

even when the night lays its starlit picnic blanket,
 i cheers to it with
 the tides accompanying me.
 maybe OCD sand dollars
 and anxiety shells
 aren't so pretty to some,
 and the PMDD pebbles
 and body dysmorphia sea glass
 and dermatillomania shark teeth
 aren't smooth enough to take home.
 but next to the indomitable ocean and cozy sand,
 they are just part of this beach,
 aren't they?

people get the wrong idea
 when they see my waves—
 they tell me to just ride them out,
 to get onboard a ship and
 cut
 through
 them,
 to dominate them
 and bring them
 under my control.
 but my waves
 aren't something you subjugate.
 they are someone
 i listen to,
 i compromise with,
 i apologize to,
 and forgive.
 because even though the water's cold,
 it erodes
 the rocky violence that pierces my peace
 and it gently washes away
 the self-hatred in my eyes.

 my disabled tides are constant and generous,
 teaching me
 how to allow,
 how to unapologetically live on.
 they are daring and fluid,
 taking a different shape every day.
 they are my imperfect,
 unpredictable,
 untamable,
 and beloved waves.

unnamed disabled wor(l)ds

Content Warning: colonialism, fascism, political violence

my skin is a residence i barely rented—
 i could not claim it because really,
 was it mine?

white colonizers demolished our burmese world
 and then the local military regime
 constructed the stifling towers of terror—
 they are the authoritarian landlords writing the rules:
 CONFORM
 CONFORM
 CONFORM

generations passed and disability is smudged
 throughout burmese lineages
 because who can afford to untangle that
 when everyday emergency wafts through the vents?
 what matters is surviving—
 whatever it is,
 we will make it work.

these terms and conditions
 don't permit my burmese disability—
 i cannot afford to be evicted from my body
 because just where would i go?
 so my burmese disability stays boxed up
 and i live like
 i wasn't meant to stay.

because someone like me should've been imprisoned
 in the asylum where british colonizers
 could use me
 to affirm their subjugation of my people,
 epitomizing me as inferior,
 a defining foil for the white supremacist conquest
 that outlawed and flattened
 bodies like mine.

and someone like me should've been hospitalized
 in the psych ward where doctors
 mocked me and rejected my testimony
 because western medicine
 doesn't listen to burmese voices.
 when we point to the disabling fear
 of fascist surveillance and politics,
 of totalitarian control and censorship,
 midnight kidnappings and secret spies,
 civil wars and deadened cries—
 we are prescribed drugs if we're lucky,

as if that will bring us liberty.

our Burmese bodies are rickety,
worn multi-generational homes
that have endured political disasters—
i call myself disabled
but we don't all call it that,
and i'm not sure we need to.

sometimes disability is the burrs
caught on our clothes,
sticking to us as we walk along,
picked off if possible.
but we don't need to talk about it,
and we don't always know the names
of what we carry with us.

disability is also the clothes
adorning our bodies,
just another part of our day
that requires care instructions.
there is no question we tend to it—
it is just a matter of how,
and we don't need to talk to care.

named or not, my disability
is not an apolitical coincidence.
it is far from a stroke of misfortune,
an individual accident—
it is the ramification of targeted violence
that brought me and my ancestors
to the throes of debilitation.

even so,
my Burmeseness and disability
are water and oil,
unable to find cohesion,
and yet are still atomically,
existentially real.
they co-exist
with each other
but can't homogenize
because they aren't
built for that.

yet i make *kyet tha hyin*,
 a Burmese chicken soup where
 iridescent oil pearls at the surface
 of clear broth.
 with every sip,
 i feel comforted that
 the water and oil
 make such
 a warm and nourishing meal.

in those unmixable layers,
 there is a glistening liminality
 where people like me
 are allowed to live.
 houses become homes
 depending on how you fill up
 the space inside,
 so under my skin,
 my body will make room
 for multi-truthed disabled worlds
 that don't always need words.

The Depths of Disablement: Reflections on My Oppression and Violence Poetry

Model Minority Myth Intersections: Contextual Advantages and the Disablement of Erasure

Since the mid-twentieth century, the model minority myth has pervaded the American consciousness, painting Asian Americans as exemplary, industrious workers that other people of color should strive to be like (Wallace, 2021). Cheah (2011) discusses how neoconservatives constructed the concept of the model minority in response to burgeoning civil rights movements in the 1960s. They framed Asian Americans “as hardworking, self-reliant, successful, and assimilating,” able to overcome

all obstacles to climb the class ladder and achieve the American dream without government assistance (84). However, this supposedly positive stereotype in fact was just covert racism meant to bolster the white supremacist status quo. By insisting Asian Americans were a “model minority,” neoconservatives conversely defined the “problem minorities” as all other racialized communities, such as Blacks and Latines. As a result, Asian Americans became a scapegoat for the frustration of other racialized people while enabling white people to dismiss institutional and structural barriers, which were framed as irrelevant since Asian Americans succeeded regardless (86). From the start, white supremacy’s creation of the model minority myth pitted Asian Americans against their other racialized kin and eroded possibilities for sociopolitical solidarity and change. Simultaneously, the myth dismisses the racial violence Asian Americans face and flattens Asian Americans into a monolith of middle class or above, East Asian, light-skinned people.

Even with these checkered origins, the complicated reality of the model minority myth is that it constructs a proximity to whiteness for Asian Americans—a proximity that does bring indirect and contextually dependent advantages. Oh and Eguchi (2022) point out how these “contextual advantages” help us “make sense of Asian Americans’ relative safety with the police, at least compared to law enforcement’s over-policing and violent treatment of Black Americans; Asian Americans’ higher median incomes; and relative advantages with initial employment” (Son, 2014, as cited in Oh and Eguchi, 2022, 474). They introduce contextual advantages as “hegemonic openings that provide relative advantages to particular groups of color in different cases because of the racial politics

and purposes of White supremacy within a specific sociohistorical/cultural/economic moment” (475). They go on to explain:

Asian Americans’ contextual advantage in police interactions ... is not because we are valued for our humanity as White privilege provides to White people. Instead, Asian Americans are likely to be killed less frequently because we are viewed as less threatening within racist, patriarchal logics. In that specific interaction, this is a relative advantage that comes from the hegemonic opening made available through the rendering of Asian Americans as passive and weak. (475)

Oh and Eguchi emphasize that this relative advantage is not racial privilege because it comes at a cost. That same perception of Asian American docility and obedience also feeds “the fetishization of Asian American women as submissive and the emasculation of Asian American men” (475). They distinguish racial privilege as having the power to create or more easily change “material and discursive systems”; meanwhile, contextual advantages are “conditioned on the whims, strategies, and purposes of White supremacy” and are not determined by people of color themselves (475). In this sense, “Asian privilege” technically does not exist in a white supremacist society, further underscoring the precarity and conditionality of Asian American living. However, it is also simultaneously true that within an anti-Black and anti-Indigenous society, non-Black and non-Indigenous privilege exists, and the model minority myth allows for contextual advantages *because* of its constructed dissociation from and devaluation of Blackness and Indigenousness (R. Gorman, personal communication, August 5, 2023). This matrix of privilege, contextual advantage, and oppression thus lead me to inquire: what does the reality of the “model minority” look like on the ground? How do those costs and hazards manifest in the disablement of Burmese people?

My poems, “made for” and “trophy asphyxiation,” showcase themes around the production of the model minority myth, who that production serves, and what that production costs. I illustrate the hegemonic assumption of the myth that Asian Americans do not suffer as well as my distinct Burmese experience of erasure in the Western gaze, even within the Asian American sphere. Through various reflections on my intersectional identity, my poems confess feelings of erasure, wrongness, contortion, guilt, complacency, shame, survival, and insignificance. Rather than a black and white depiction of privilege and oppression, my poem reveals my personal entanglement of contextual advantage and erasure as a disabled Chinese-Burmese woman.

These poems showcase the structural violence that Burmese Americans and other Asian Americans endure due to the model minority myth along the axes of race, class, gender, and skin color. Just as I am boxed up and “passed over” as a product to serve white supremacy and its illusion of the American Dream, others are as well. This “passing over” is a form of slow death (Nixon, 2011; Sandset, 2021)—a stealthy passing away, faded out by the hands of white supremacy. It is made evident by the flattening of our personhood, wherein white supremacy positions us as a two-dimensional Asian monolith, all East Asian, light-skinned, economically coasting, with nothing to complain about. In this perspective, we lose our humanity. This means that Burmese refugees are also categorized under the category of model minority, despite having no financial or social capital (Cheah, 2011, 87). Furthermore, the myth discards the sociopolitical nuances of our history and contemporary presence. For instance, I spoke in my poem about being both upper middle class and Burmese, but this intersection is not simply

because my parents successfully achieved immigrant economic mobility. Rather, my class is complicated by how the first few waves of Burmese immigrants “almost all came under the skills preference option of the 1965 Immigration Act” because there weren’t any preceding Burmese communities to bring them under other immigration justifications (82). This meant that most Bay Area Burmese immigrants, like my parents, ended up being “mostly educated and belonging to middle- or upper-class families” (82). In other words, my class is palpably influenced by this American immigrant policy seeking skilled laborers who are capitalistically valuable. Even so, we are not “social equals” to white people (92). Because we do not have racial privilege, we “are not afforded authority, inclusion, or respect,” shown in how we have less access to resources and less control over major systems (e.g., political, economic, educational, media, religion, etc.) (Oh and Eguchi, 2022, 474). While this history does not invalidate the arduous effort Burmese immigrants and their families expended to survive in America, it does exhibit one of the countless ways that sociopolitical intersections are coincidentally overlooked in the reductionistic apparatus of the model minority myth.

As seen in my poems, for Burmese people, the model minority myth can consequently act as a force of disablement in the form of erasure. In my case, the constructed paradox of my Burmese existence bred the precarious ambiguity and fear-based perfectionism that ultimately characterized the manifestation, perception, and treatment of my disabilities. The paradox in question is one of invisibility and hypervisibility, where I cannot and have not experienced racism because I am popularized as the ideal minority who can overcome any and all barriers, systemic or not.

By glossing over my experiences of oppression and constraining me to an unattainable expectation, the model minority myth blurs the truth of my experiences and needs. I remained in various states of confusion—was I marginalized or not? —I was neither here nor there; I did not know what my own truths were. Without that sense of direction, I could only vaguely tell myself that I didn't have it the worst, but I also didn't have it the best. And because I didn't have it the best, I needed to work for that if I wanted to survive.

The model minority myth thus rooted my underlying trauma response of perfectionism. I killed myself, striving to be perfect, satisfactory, exceptional, but I was simultaneously never good enough and performing as an imposter. This is the overarching framework driving my disabilities; my autism, anxiety, OCD, PMDD, eating disorder, body dysmorphia, dermatillomania, and more are all catered to and/or in response to being the model minority that doesn't exist. As such, my disabilities as a Burmese person cannot be extricated from the sociopolitical and structural context which they reside in precisely because they are born from them.

One way my poems demonstrates disablement in the form of erasure is through their illustration of Western biomedical violence. In “made for,” there is a stanza of my being on the DSM production line describing how my eating disorder (ED) and body dysmorphia (BD) are multiply written off (42-60). Not only is my eating disorder literally “othered” (it is considered an Unspecified Eating Disorder, since it does not fall into any official DSM category), but my eating disorder along with my body dysmorphia may also be written off by the Western mainstream eye as ordinary habits of regularly working out

or being self-conscious. In this way, my ED and BD are sidelined or perceived as “not as severe” and thus not as worthy of concern. Additionally, because the DSM was written by and for white Western bodies, treatment is also suited for white Western bodies and/or leaves out Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) bodies, further outcasting care for my disabled Burmese bodymind (Minsky-Kelly & Hornung, 2022). Finally, Western biomedicine individualizes and depoliticizes my eating disorder and body dysmorphia. They are poised as my individual, private problem to treat through psychiatric drugs and therapies. They may be tied to gendered expectations about my body and appearance, or perhaps they will be connected to unrealistic expectations bolstered by the patriarchy as marketed on social media. However, there is less investigation or investment in the intersectional roots of racialized people’s eating disorders and body dysmorphia, especially from a structural disability perspective. As my poem describes, my eating disorder and body dysmorphia are disabilities tied to being a “skinny asian miss,” indicating the racist and sexist pressure involved for Asian / Asian American women in obtaining thinness due to the sexually objectifying male gaze, stereotyping, and fatphobic Asian beauty/body standards for women (Brady et al., 2017; Negi et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2017). However, Western biomedicine glosses over this, instead even pathologizing this sociopolitically-rooted coping and survival mechanism.

White Gatekeeping of Burmese Disabled “Being”: The Disablement of Exclusion and Epistemic Violence

In addition to erasure, the model minority myth is a form of categorization and white gatekeeping on Burmese disabled “being,” or ways to exist. Through this myth,

white supremacy excludes who is considered worthy of support and believing. In other words, it determines who is considered authentically in need of disability accommodations and who is reliable in terms of disability self-knowledge and self-determination. In this way, it controls whom disability resources go toward and who the disability narrative includes by policing who accesses them. White supremacy is thus able to maintain its claim to state benefits by upholding this association of disability with the white subject.

Using the metaphor of a lofty trophy case, “trophy asphyxiation” explores the suffocation and costs that come with the model minority myth. Specifically, it focuses on the disablement that occurs when those costs impacted my experiences of disability within the Western biomedical system. Because of white therapists, I experienced barriers to disability accommodations and diagnosis, exemplifying how white supremacy drives disability politics and its exclusion of racialized, disabled bodies. Considering the overlap of whiteness with the disabled subject, who then is allowed to identify with disability rhetoric and reap state disability benefits? I want to emphasize how my class and educational privilege already allowed me to get as far as seeing multiple therapists and having a community to facilitate my comfort in self-advocacy. Even so, Western biomedicine left me on the fringes anyway due to my intersection as a disabled Burmese woman. Illustrated by the line, “exotic trophies don’t need help,” I was denied psychiatric verification for academic accommodations by my white therapist despite months of confiding and navigating my mental illnesses with him because I was a “model minority”

who was inherently resilient and readily successful (6). This reflects the pernicious influence of white supremacy and model minority myth on disability politics.

Similarly, Western biomedicine also enacts disablement by wreaking epistemic violence. As my poem reflects in the line “exotic trophies don’t know themselves” (18), a different white therapist denied my self-knowledge when she rejected my suggestion that I believed I was autistic. Even after attempting to point to pieces of my life to prove my claim (as if it were something I needed to prove in the first place), she still refused the possibility, not even allowing me to get tested for autism. She so deeply believed in her expertise as a white therapist that she refuted my lived and embodied experience as a Burmese disabled person, overriding my insistence that I was autistic with her white biomedical opinion. This depicts the characteristic arrogance of white supremacy which assumes that it is the authority on Asian bodies (Cheah, 2011). Ultimately, this works to strengthen the constructed incompatibility of Burmeseness and disability and heighten white claims to disability.

My poem, “trophy asphyxiation,” especially attests to the disablement that Burmese disabled people like me can face and how white supremacy governs access and politics around disability identity. Its execution of epistemic violence is part of a larger project of determining which bodies can adopt a disability identity and receive associated state benefits and social visibility. By placing disability authority in white professionals and rejecting the self-knowledge of racialized disabled people, white supremacy also constructs the exclusion of people of color from disability identity and therefore disability resources, community, and advocacy. As Gorman (2016) puts it, claiming disability

identity “is complicated by the realities of racialization” and is inextricably tied to “the disqualification of racialized populations as disabled subjects” (253-254). In my case, this disablement has led to difficulties getting academic accommodations and being present in higher education as well as in accessing an autistic diagnosis and the benefits that come with that. My Burmese disability identity is thus negotiated according to the white decrees of what qualifies as disability and who is deserving of the resources attached to that.

The political economy of disability is built on the foundation of the white disabled subject who can receive state benefits and access disability identity. Erevelles and Minear (2010) point out how “disability as the organizing ideological force that is deployed ... as the means to organize the social hierarchies in their respective historical contexts” (142). In other words, rather than just an apolitical biomedical condition, disability can also act as an index of social positionality given the contemporary moment. The authors detail the experience of Cassie Smith, a Black girl with a learning disability who was bounced throughout special education, to highlight her disablement by the education system. Race and disability influenced how Cassie was structurally treated, seen in how she was perceived as being intellectually behind and emotionally unregulated rather than struggling and isolated. The authors argue that special education acted more as a segregating force than a supportive one, as it separated “students who disrupt the ‘normal’ functioning of schools” (142). Like how the education system chose to segregate rather than support Cassie, psychiatry also only facilitates accommodations and knowledge for those it deems deserving.

My poem reveals how white supremacy and psychiatry work hand in hand to protect the sanctity of who is truly disabled enough to receive structural assistance. My Burmeseness meant that, in the white eye, I was a model minority whose disability was not sufficiently debilitating, so I evidently didn't need accommodations or an autistic diagnosis. This way, it could maintain the purity of the disability diagnostic category and the privileges said category allows for. But if those are the grounds defining disability, then what about all the other marginalized communities who cannot fit that white image? Who feels they can see themselves within disability? Who is allowed that? And even if they do, who will actually be able to reap all the benefits that comes with disability alignment?

Looking at my poems and experiences from a structural disability lens, we can see how white supremacy can gatekeep Burmese disabled being by epistemically rejecting embodied knowledge and excluding non-white bodies from the disability sphere. My poems detail how this disablement consequently affect my own experience of disability—including how my disability manifests, lack of support around my disabilities, and obstruction of disability identity. As was the case for me, this can also lead to exclusion from disability information, resources, and community because certain marginalized people are not allowed to access disability identity. From this white, Western biomedical model, I was left to individually fend for myself and my disabilities, as many marginalized others often are.

Stitching Together “Me”: Reflections on My Liberation and Love Poetry

Hegemonic approaches of disability may be appealing in that making disability an individual, biomedical problem means it can have an individual, biomedical solution. While not necessarily a panacea, personal responsibility and medical treatment for disability could be more straightforward and accessible resolutions. Making disability a sociopolitical issue would require corresponding structural and societal changes—changes that could take too long or be too daunting to tackle. Admittedly, in a Western society that rests in individualism, sociopolitical transformation is intimidating because it bifurcates agents of change into individuals and systems. However, what happens when we approach disability from a relational lens, seeing it as a collective experience rather than an individual one? How can community cultivate collective love and liberation to help withstand currently oppressive times while simultaneously paving paths for freer futures? Through three poems about liberation and love, I depicted how a relational approach to disability facilitated an embracing, belonging, and believing that enable a disabled Burmese woman like me to exist as a collective manifestation and force amid disablement.

Communities as a Kin(dling) Refuge

Whereas the oppression and violence poems display the landscape of disablement I navigate(d), the liberation and love poems paint an emergence through said structural terrain. Rather than a linear path, the poems reveal a growing spatial safety that simultaneously resists looming systemic oppression and expands a community-fueled, rejuvenating haven for myself. It is because of the communities I am / have been a part of that I embrace my disability and can be planted within ambiguity. In this way, these

poems make disability extend beyond a single body, making it also a site of collective experience. It is through this communal connection that my disability rejects a purely Western individualistic framework and becomes part of the creation of a new collective world—a refuge from an unrelenting, debilitating, violent world. And it is in that nexus of other people, that carved-out sanctuary, that I feel my existence affirmed, resonated, and allowed.

One example of this communal refuge is the Burmese Buddhist community I grew up with called the Theravada Buddhist Society of America (TBSA). In 1980, TBSA established the Dhammananda Vihāra as “the first Burmese monastery in the Bay Area” and is also “one of the oldest and largest Burmese Buddhist monasteries in the United States” (Cheah, 2011, 96, 98). The monastery not only “represents a spacialization of Burmeseness ... within an American landscape,” but also cultivates that Burmeseness in a way that allows the community to resist Anglo American assimilation and conserve collective Burmese identity (89).

To be clear, Burmeseness is inextricably tied to Burmese Buddhism and vice versa. Burmeseness (*bamahsan gyin*) describes the “meanings, values, and the ways of living” as shown through behavioral norms within Burmese culture; this includes Burmese Theravāda Buddhism as well as “a desire not to impose on others (*ah nah day*), a respect for elders, and a lifestyle that values the quiet, subtle, and indirect rather than the loud, obvious, and direct” (Cheah, 2011, 94). Because TBSA and Dhammananda Vihāra held Burmese Buddhist festivals and an annual Burmese Buddhist summer camp, it acted as a “socio-cultural center” as well as a religious space where I became more

rooted in “the fundamentals of Burmese Buddhism, culture, language, and history” alongside my peers (99, 102). Because of the TBSA community, I could hold onto my Burmese Buddhist heritage and resist “a total erasure or marginalization of the identity, culture, and agency of Burmese Americans” (112). Because of the TBSA community, I can more safely navigate the diffraction of my Burmese American Buddhist “self” where I must consistently negotiate the “continuity and rupture” within developing my multifaceted cultural identity (Cheah, 2002, 418).

For me, TBSA was/is a place of gathering, connection, spiritual attunement, belonging, and re-turning. Relating with my immigrant and child-of-immigrant peers over learning Buddhist Pālī chants, eating Burmese cuisine, struggling with speaking with Burmese, applying Buddhist philosophies in the modern day, and being the unheard-of minority was crucial for me to tread the racialized, ableist erasure and exclusion I faced throughout my life. When I experienced the disablement of the model minority myth and white supremacy, I was barred from being a disabled Burmese person; my mental illnesses were dismissed as not being severe enough for academic accommodations, and my assertion that I was autistic was blatantly rejected as a possibility. Meanwhile, I still faced the disablement of how the model minority myth and pressure to assimilate fueled most of my disabilities to begin with. Many of them are largely driven by attempting to survive fitting in as a racialized autistic woman and/or are the consequences of that lived experience. Yet, it was because of the unconditional generosity and compassion from peers, volunteers, teachers, and monks that I still feel materialized in my Burmese identity, unable to be completely snuffed out by the

disablement of white Western assimilation. Because of how TBSA embraced me, I can retain more of my authentic “self” amidst the compulsion to conform.

Another pivotal community for me was the mentally ill and disabled student communities I became part of during my undergraduate years at Brown University.³ These communities were the Project LETS (Let’s Erase the Stigma) at Brown community and the Disability Justice at Brown (DJAB) community. Before college, I identified as a mental illness ally and was at a loss for how to support people beyond individual or biomedical care. However, with LETS, I was able to realize, accept, and feel empowered in my own mentally ill identity. With DJAB, I was able to identify as disabled and be proud of it. Because of both communities, I could not only better care for my disabled self, but I could also show up for others through disabled peer support, mutual aid, and advocacy. These communities showed me what active practices of liberation could look like. We candidly discussed our everyday complications with our disabilities and our experiences with institutional ableism, all while constantly believing we were all unconditionally worthy of care and belonging. We validated our subjective and undiagnosed experiences, welcoming each other in our socially deviant bodyminds and trusting our embodied knowledges when systems and society wouldn’t. Unwaveringly, those communities were there for me, and I was there for them. They gave me the support

³ While I consider mental illness a disability, here I refer to the mentally ill community and disabled community as separate entities because of their organizational location. The former belongs to one student organization whereas the latter resides in another student organization. However, there was/is much overlap between these organizations as well as within the larger disability justice movement. Additionally, while I personally identify as mentally ill and disabled, some peers identified as living with mental illness but not necessarily disabled.

and faith that allowed me to not only shift how I viewed my own disabilities, but also how I approached disability in general. They allowed me to see my disabilities not as personal, moral failings, but as complex sociopolitically-shaped conditions lying at the intersections of my marginalizations.

As such, when disablement molded the manifestation and societal treatment of my disabilities, I was able to make sense and move through such baffling and eviscerating times because of the love and liberation I experienced from LETS and DJAB. When my white therapist refused to sign my psychiatric verification for academic accommodations, I shared the entire debacle with the LETS community, which resonated with me and condemned the violence I endured. My peers offered help in figuring out next steps while never doubting that I was valid for needing accommodations. When a different white therapist denied that I could be autistic, I was able to advocate for myself in the moment and later self-identify as autistic because the LETS and DJAB communities exhibited how the legitimacy of our disabilities was determined by us, regardless of what the psychiatric system claimed. Because of LETS and DJAB, I experienced a comforting and empowering belonging that anchored me when disablement threatened to unmoor me.

My accumulated experiences in Burmese Buddhist community as well as mentally ill, disabled community have more recently enabled me to lean into the expansiveness of liminality. Rather than separate my Burmese Buddhist identity from my disabled one, I have instead begun to revel in the possibilities of the in-between—if I were neither solely this nor that, then who can I be? However, the key to this has not been shunning my Burmese Buddhist self or my disabled self. It has been to assert, commune,

and believe in both, all at once. This act of trusting allows both historically segregated sides of me to be honored as they are while giving space to intermingle and collide to form new worlds in and outside of me.

Becoming a Diffracted Force

In the West, individual tenacity and industriousness are elevated as the keys to working through hardship or obstacles. Through private, rationalist, and biomedical solutions, we approach disability like an arithmetic equation that just needs to be properly solved. But from this section and the MRP in general, we can see that disability is not a simple, quantifiable, or “solvable” matter. In fact, the question of solving disability is thrust up into the air. Instead, there is a rich lucidness in painting the various hues of complications that come with disability, especially from a structural disability perspective. And in the same way that original picture is so nuanced with depth, meaning, and context, looking at disability from a relational approach also elicits a similar level of profundity. As such, my liberation and love section explores not curing or eradicating violence and oppression, but imagining the worlds we want instead and how, presently, we can forge those worlds together in community.

In response to the disablement presented in my oppression and violence poems, my liberation and love poems chart the contemporaneous praxis and dream of relationality to experience and strive for a more emancipated and supported disabled Burmese existence. Rather than a simple linear progression, the poems convey not just the vision of liberation and love through relationality, but also the process of which we move through disablement to emerge there. My poems depict this in an active relating,

negotiating, reflecting, reclaiming, carving, asserting. This active cultivation through collectivity and community allowed me to critically re-turn liberation as my Burmese disabled “self.” I nurtured faith in my multiply marginalized embodied experiences while advocating for spaces that centered my communities. I more unapologetically showcased my Burmese disabled being while excavating academic discourse to make room for the collectives that make me up. Because of the embracing, belonging, and believing I experienced within relationality, I have become a knitted assemblage of my communities and have been able to act as a diffracted force reverberating with love.

CONCLUSION: RE-TURNING FROM HERE

My Poetry is Ours

The story my poems narrates is one of confinement, suffocation, and erasure as well as solace and liberation in the love of others. My oppression and violence poems outline the ways in which the white, Western world perceives me and how those categorizations box me in. In particular, the manufacturing of who I’m supposed to be as well as what happens when I don’t fit that ideal emanates a sense of desperation, isolation, and dejection. In my poems, I am swallowed by the white supremacist plan, inundated with the helplessness and defeat of being manipulated and compelled, and how such experiences contribute to my disablement. My poems elucidate how, both in terms of how my disabilities show up and how they are read by societies and systems, the disablement I have navigated has been nebulously insidious and invisibilized.

Yet, my poetry collection also portrays how I have re-turned amidst this disablement. What breaks through this smog of oppression and violence is people—a community, inviting me into their warm circle where I feel materialized again. Because of that, my poetry transitions to what is made possible—a radical turn of focusing on reclaiming and reasserting how *I* feel about my disabilities, rather than centering how the world perceives me and my disabilities. By the end of the collection, there’s an erosion and rejection of the binary constructions of categories initially described in my oppression and violence poems. In its place, there is a wading into the liminality, the in-between, and how such a space is so infinitely freeing.

If my poetry collection were a story, it would tell the story of a Burmese disabled girl who was manufactured and dehumanized by the model minority myth and white supremacy but then found liberation and love in community, which allowed her to re-turn and more fully exist as she is. As the title of the 2023 Academy Award-winning film suggests, my poetry illuminates how—because of my communities—I can be and am everything, everywhere, all at once. And, because my poetry is ours, anyone else can and is all of that too.

Reflections on Process and Future Research

Due to limitations on page length, I implemented inductive theme analysis for entire sections rather than individual poems. As a result, I was unable to discuss the nuances of each poem. Along these lines, I also had to shorten my poetry collection down to five poems based on its discussion of Burmese disability. My future research may

return to these poems with more detailed analysis and/or an investigation of an expanded collection depicting the disablement and liberation within Burmese disability.

Let's Re-Turn Together: Hopes for Impact

Aligned with the interdisciplinary nature of Critical Disability Studies (CDS), my research has entailed an overlap of creative writing art, CDS, and social justice. By using poetry as research data and evidence of theory/knowledge, my research has equipped creative writing to unveil and advance CDS in terms of arts-based theory and activism. In this way, my MRP challenges CDS and academia through its critical autoethnographic arts-based and diffractive lens methodology, stretching these spaces to continue moving beyond Western, individualist, and identity-based ideas of disability. In other words, by delving into and practicing a thesis based on a structural and relational framework of disability, my MRP and its paired poetry collection(s) contributes to centering racialized disabled experiences, needs, and visions in the academic field of Critical Disability Studies and beyond. Specifically, my work contributes to discourse around relationality and its impact around disability. Through my poems, I have demonstrated how relationality has been an invitation—an intervention, an opening, where I could navigate my disability and disablement more on my own terms with the assurance of unconditional collective love. This concept is especially important to explore as an approach to navigating disablement, considering relationality's central role in Burmese culture as well as other Asian and racialized cultures.

Through critical autoethnographic poetic inquiry and a diffractive lens, I have explored how my Burmese disabled poetry reveals the collective worlds I am made up of

in terms of oppression and violence as well as liberation and love. I have used a disability justice framework, focusing on a structural and relational approach to disability, to interrogate and complicate hegemonic Western, individualistic, and biomedical understandings of disability. With this, I hope to not only decentralize the Western idea of my “self,” but also forefront the communities that make me up and enable my Burmese disabled existence as a diffracted force for social change and collective liberation. Within that, I hope for my poetry and MRP to allow disabled Burmese readers as well as other marginalized readers to re-turn with me in their own world of collective worlds and find whatever it is they need most. After all, my poetry, world, and liberation aren’t just mine. They are ours.

re-turn anytime

my kin, your visit in my village
 is over for now,
 but you’ve got
 souvenirs of your own—
 not the ones made for you,
 but the ones we made ourselves.
 not the capitalist trophies,
 but laughter in the night breeze,
 the light of the campfire,
 the beaming of people.

i hope you take it with you:
 the resonance in your bones,
 the comfort of wild waves,
 the unnamed infinity of liminality.
 take what you need,
 take what you dream,
 take what you believe.
 this space isn’t just for me,
 so please receive with ease
 and re-turn anytime.

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APPENDIX A: Poetry Version of MRP (Condensed)

setting

the village that grows me up

Content Warning: mention of colonialism, epistemic violence, anti-Asian racism, fetishization

soft blue sky.
 comforter clouds float hand-in-hand.
 the sun holds sunshine above us like an umbrella,
 making sure we are protected and nestled
 by its warm breaths.
 the air is perfumed with fresh laundry:
 crisp, clean, sweet.

we walk on the dirt road,
 paved well by feet that wanted
 to protect the grass.
 you haven't been here before,
 haven't seen those mountainscapes,
 those rice fields or types of wildflowers.
where is the pollution?
the noise? the blaring lights?
 i laugh and tell you
out here,
it is quiet and safe and freeing.

i take you house to house,
 introducing you to the people who raised me,
 who fought alongside me,
 who embraced me even in my unknown.
 i regale you with childhood stories,
 war stories,
 love stories,
 as we are fed the sweet and savories
 of unconditional care.

then i show you the places
 where white robbers had scorched down our crops
 and made the soil into char
 and poisoned the river
 we all got our water from.

where medical quacks talked over me
 and crushed me into dust.
 where englishmen gagged at my food
 and then objectified me in the same breath.
 where i kept secrets and myself hidden
 because my body didn't seem good enough
 because my body didn't seem bad enough
 because my body didn't seem enough.

i can see the tears in your eyes
 maybe because you felt it too
 but don't you worry—
 i'm about to show you
 where everyone came in
 and helped me heal too.
 after all, i've shown you only a peek
 of this world of mine,
 and the village that grows me up.

oppression & violence

made for

Content Warning: white supremacy, eating disorder, body dysmorphia

i've got it easy, i've got it good
 hardship is surely not a boat i know
 and sinking in the sea is a faraway woe
 light skin, relatively thin
 upper middle class, white proximity pass
 my asian ass has it made in
 the white Western glance:
 i have it made—
 i was made
 in china,
 in burma,
 and sold in America,
 fit into boxes and exported
 to sell well in meritocracy scams
 marketing this shitty land,
 the narrative of the resilient hand,
 the story of “even they can”,
 all for the white supremacy plan

i have it made, i was made
and the world
was surely made for me

i'm a fake doll with no space
tolerated when i leave no trace
because don't i comply just fine?
in the asian race i'm just another face—
korean? japanese? chinese?
i'm an ad that won't clarify
in the Western eye,
just another light-skinned, shy,
erased burmese sight;
it's my fault
burma is summed up
in exotic cuisine
or the military regime
it's my fault
no one knows we're suffering
that our margins
aren't lined with dreaming

i have it made, i was made
and the world
was surely made for me

on the DSM production line,
i am a throwaway defective
whose eating disorder
puts me in "miscellaneous"—
i do not look right
for the white recovery wish
my obsessive exercise
is but a healthy habit
my body dysmorphia
is just self-awareness
and surely not molding myself
to be a skinny asian miss,
to be pretty and valuable,
to be femininely fuckable,
to be finally desirable
it's my fault
my body is like this

it's my fault
i am the wrong kind of fit

i have it made, i was made
and the world
was surely made for me

finally made as diverse enough
but not so different,
i am shipped out to white neighborhoods
where my proximity to power
turns my "could" into "would"
my "would" into "should"
and i should be grateful
my foreign skin gets to live
that i'm held safe with my kin
that my time in the factory
will amount to something
it's my fault
people of color aren't here
and are gated out of existence
it's my fault
money comes with whiteness
that i am on the wrong side of the fence

i have it made, i was made
and the world
was surely made for me

i was made in china and burma
only to be exported for the white Western agenda
my light skin is close enough
and my thinness could use some work,
my money proves it's not luck,
and my asianness is a bonus quirk
but in the backrooms of white storefronts,
i am made out as an overseas maiden minx:
pure and corrupting,
worthy if i'm prostrating,
in need of white dominating.
it's my fault
i'm in this position
that whiteness is the mission
it's my fault

i uphold these conditions
i survive with these decisions

i have it made, i was made
but the world
wasn't made for me

trophy case asphyxiation

Content Warning: epistemic violence

the model minority myth likes to make me forget
that being asian makes me a dressed up target,
that white people pin up my face
and love to put me in their fancy trophy case—
a transparent and asphyxiating place

exotic trophies don't need help, you know
and that's why i should've known
when i asked my white therapist
i'd confided to all summer
about my mental illnesses
for his psychiatric verification
so i could get needed accommodations
but even when i pleaded
even when i sobbed on the phone,
he told me in a hollow sympathetic tone,
"i'm sorry, i can't sign
i think you'll be fine"

and exotic trophies don't know themselves
because they're just arranged on high shelves,
so when i told another white therapist
that i thought i was autistic
and wanted to get tested,
i shouldn't have been surprised
when she asked me why
and i had to prove myself with evidence
like i hadn't been in my body all my life,
and even when i spread
piece after piece of my truths,
she frowned and firmly said,
"i don't think you're autistic,

and i don't think you need to be tested"

so if you're wondering why
 i went without accommodations for months
 i don't have an official autistic diagnosis
 you can look to the white gaze
 that keeps me in a glass case
 where i cannot be human,
 where i cannot be accommodated,
 where i cannot believe myself,
 where i cannot be

liberation & love

our bonfire refuge

foggy, chilling
 slate shores
 engulf me.
 the sun is hard to spy
 behind forsaken skies.
 light diffuses,
 confused,
 like me.
 oppressive gusts
 cut my skin,
 crush my ribs,
 crack my lips.
 maybe gray days
 are the world's way
 of saying go away.
 i'm not sure
 how to stay.

but the fog goes
 when embers glow
 in a makeshift bonfire
 for us outliers.
 faces lit up,
 no questions asked—
 people wave me over,
 invite me into their circle.

of my bodymind,
 they follow the cosmic swirls in the air
 and chase the stars
 even when the sky's bare.
 they like to nap
 when the sun is shining
 because she is so warm
 with her daylight hair,
 and they splash more excitedly
 when people
 dip their feet in
 and are not scared of them
 for once.

 sometimes i'll go to the edge
 and they'll be so low
 that they can barely
 creep up to the ground.
 there will be dams
 on their waterfall origins
 and some ableist trash
 they accidentally swallowed.
 it wasn't their fault though,
 was it?

sometimes they break loose
 and go
 beyond their bounds
 into the lives of others—
 tsunamis and hurricanes
 storm in
 with pain in tow,
 and my tears
 mix in with
 their salt water because
 i see exactly who
 they sweep up
 in their flow,
 in their loneliness
 and
 sorrow.

 but if memory serves me correctly,
 they are just

a part of nature,
 they are
 what they are
 what they are
 what they are—
 can my earth really be mine without them?
 in their tide pools, i find
 habitats of care:
 small little worlds
 unto themselves,
 with their own niches
 and synergies.
 can they really exist without the tides?

gazing off at where
 the water
 meets the sand,
 i don't leave because
 the ocean's roaring
 is my air conditioner hum
 and the shifty beach under my feet
 shows me how to understand
 outside of rigidity.
 i make damp sandcastles out of
 autistic shutdowns
 and eating disorder flares—
 an ode to surviving another day,
 a celebration of all that i can make here.

even when the night lays its starlit picnic blanket,
 i cheers to it with
 the tides accompanying me.
 maybe OCD sand dollars
 and anxiety shells
 aren't so pretty to some,
 and the PMDD pebbles
 and body dysmorphia sea glass
 and dermatillomania shark teeth
 aren't smooth enough to take home.
 but next to the indomitable ocean and cozy sand,
 they are just part of this beach,
 aren't they?

people get the wrong idea

when they see my waves—
 they tell me to just ride them out,
 to get onboard a ship and
 cut
 through
 them,
 to dominate them
 and bring them
 under my control.
 but my waves
 aren't something you subjugate.
 they are someone
 i listen to,
 i compromise with,
 i apologize to,
 and forgive.
 because even though the water's cold,
 it erodes
 the rocky violence that pierces my peace
 and it gently washes away
 the self-hatred in my eyes.

my disabled tides are constant and generous,
 teaching me
 how to allow,
 how to unapologetically live on.
 they are daring and fluid,
 taking a different shape every day.
 they are my imperfect,
 unpredictable,
 untamable,
 and beloved waves.

unnamed disabled wor(l)ds

Content Warning: colonialism, fascism, political violence

my skin is a residence i barely rented—
 i could not claim it because really,
 was it mine?

white colonizers demolished our burmese world
 and then the local military regime

constructed the stifling towers of terror—
 they are the authoritarian landlords writing the rules:
 CONFORM
 CONFORM
 CONFORM

generations passed and disability is smudged
 throughout burmese lineages
 because who can afford to untangle that
 when everyday emergency wafts through the vents?
 what matters is surviving—
 whatever it is,
 we will make it work.

these terms and conditions
 don't permit my burmese disability—
 i cannot afford to be evicted from my body
 because just where would i go?
 so my burmese disability stays boxed up
 and i live like
 i wasn't meant to stay.

because someone like me should've been imprisoned
 in the asylum where british colonizers
 could use me
 to affirm their subjugation of my people,
 epitomizing me as inferior,
 a defining foil for the white supremacist conquest
 that outlawed and flattened
 bodies like mine.

and someone like me should've been hospitalized
 in the psych ward where doctors
 mocked me and rejected my testimony
 because western medicine
 doesn't listen to burmese voices.
 when we point to the disabling fear
 of fascist surveillance and politics,
 of totalitarian control and censorship,
 midnight kidnappings and secret spies,
 civil wars and deadened cries—
 we are prescribed drugs if we're lucky,
 as if that will bring us liberty.

our Burmese bodies are rickety,
 worn multi-generational homes
 that have endured political disasters—
 i call myself disabled
 but we don't all call it that,
 and i'm not sure we need to.

sometimes disability is the burrs
 caught on our clothes,
 sticking to us as we walk along,
 picked off if possible.
 but we don't need to talk about it,
 and we don't always know the names
 of what we carry with us.

disability is also the clothes
 adorning our bodies,
 just another part of our day
 that requires care instructions.
 there is no question we tend to it—
 it is just a matter of how,
 and we don't need to talk to care.

named or not, my disability
 is not an apolitical coincidence.
 it is far from a stroke of misfortune,
 an individual accident—
 it is the ramification of targeted violence
 that brought me and my ancestors
 to the throes of debilitation.

even so,
 my Burmeseness and disability
 are water and oil,
 unable to find cohesion,
 and yet are still atomically,
 existentially real.
 they co-exist
 with each other
 but can't homogenize
 because they aren't
 built for that.

yet i make *kyet tha hyin*,

a Burmese chicken soup where
 iridescent oil pearls at the surface
 of clear broth.
 with every sip,
 i feel comforted that
 the water and oil
 make such
 a warm and nourishing meal.

in those unmixable layers,
 there is a glistening liminality
 where people like me
 are allowed to live.
 houses become homes
 depending on how you fill up
 the space inside,
 so under my skin,
 my body will make room
 for multi-truthed disabled worlds
 that don't always need words.

onwards

re-turn anytime

my kin, your visit in my village
 is over for now,
 but you've got
 souvenirs of your own—
 not the ones made for you,
 but the ones we made ourselves.
 not the capitalist trophies,
 but laughter in the night breeze,
 the light of the campfire,
 the beaming of people.

i hope you take it with you:
 the resonance in your bones,
 the comfort of wild waves,
 the unnamed infinity of liminality.
 take what you need,
 take what you dream,

take what you believe.
this space isn't just for me,
so please receive with ease
and re-turn anytime.

APPENDIX B: Poetry Version of MRP (Extended)

the blasphemy of my body

american horror story

when i am up at graveyard shift hours,
call me a zombie
or just call me disabled.

if i am up when witching hour strikes
and the twilight zone
has melted into horror film darkness,
does that make me
a monster to be burned alive?

maybe i'm a vampire
who doesn't know
how to take in sunlight,
and maybe i'm a mummy
who needs to be embalmed
in a tomb away from people.

does my 9 am bedtime
give you goosebumps?
when i rise at 5 pm,
do you see my slow lumbering
and heavy body
as a frankenstein to be shot?
does my ability to transform
into a different creature
spur you into a wolf hunt?

maybe it's the way
i vanish from the world
that has you trying to confirm
if i'm a vengeful phantom,
and maybe it's the way
that i don't fit in here
that makes you convinced
i'm an alien from another galaxy.

i am an existence you can't fathom,
 up at unthinkable times,
 on a different axis of life,
 in my own plane of ways.

when i am up at graveyard shift hours,
 call me a zombie
 or just call me disabled.

from the only funeral-goer

Content Warning: fascism, colonialism, war

my people are rarely in the news—
 after the glimmer of glamour fades
 when the initial tragedy struck,
 we are missing from the obituaries
 because slow death by terror
 and secret kidnappings in the night
 are not the kind of losses
 that the new york times profits off of.

in a world where worthiness
 is marked by western adherence,
 where are we? and why is it not here?
 so sorry our fascist government
 is not the wide-eyed white serial killer
 that you can be fascinated with on netflix.
 so sorry the coup was just a twitter trend
 in the consciousness of the global north
 and that our so-called postcolonial era
 is still stained with people trying to conquer us.

somewhere in the civil wars
 where lives cost nothing to the state or world,
 and fear is snuffed out for survival,
 there are burrows of bodies
 to be honored and cremated,
 but i'm the only one spreading their ashes
 into these low waters.

the tune we live to*Content Warning: political violence, fascism*

under dark scarlet times, there are clashes and ashes—
 flashes of crashes where my people have been dashed
 and slashed away by disasters and fascists,
 when our rhythm is stopped
 and the only beats we hear
 are the soldiers' steps when they seize us
 and beat us in our gurgling fear

history is a broken clock where time seeps out like blood,
 pooling seconds and hours and months—
 waiting in the wings that can't fly,
 we are stranded in a caged land
 and glass walls that won't cry.
 we don't dare to sigh,
 only try to walk by and forget
 the truth of these lying dry eyes.

and yet the outside world thinks it knows what we need—
 the beliefs, the resources, the clichéd savior dreams—
 but it just prescribes medical remedies
 for the sociopolitical terror and hostility,
 for the military-manufactured monstrosity
 for the paranoia and prickling poverty.
 and it passes over our communities,
 our Buddhism, our feelings, our harmonies,
 like we are only just a pitiful charity of a country.
 but we know how we complexly embody,
 how we love collectively and fully,
 how we stay and live miraculously
 as we wait to see us be free.

unholy body*Content Warning: sexual assault, sexism, eating disorder, fatphobia, body dysmorphia*

the girls gossip about clean eating,
 like there's some way of nourishing yourself
 that could be called dirty—
 i am a temple template that must be wiped down,
 a purity priestess who cannot be soiled

by whorish, devious processed meals.
 to offer myself up as sacrifice,
 i must be the right weight,
 a holy beauty,
 a pretty trinity of
 whole but not fat
 stunning but not electrifying
 pleasing but not pleased.

men seem to like me better
 when my limbs are easier to marionette,
 and my mouth can be manipulated
 to choke on their egos
 and swallow their arrogance.
 their eyes (mal)linger on me,
 chalkboard-screech gazes
 that ring in my brain
 as i try to walk in the world
 pretending i heard nothing.

at home, the gossip and gazes stay:
 they grab me, force me
 to look at the mirror
 and point out
that's wrong
 that's wrong
 that's wrong.

they applaud with sarcasm
 when my fat runs away,
 when the lines of my body come out
 with guns behind their backs.
please
please don't tell me
my body is better like this

multiple times a day:
 i check
 and check
 and check—
 what is different?
 is this difference good?
 am i a worthy sacrifice now?
 my eyes shout that
my body doesn't need to change

my body doesn't need to change
my body doesn't need to change
but in between all the mirror confrontations
and gossip and gazes,
i am lost in the purgatory
of a melted body i cannot grasp
and my cries are gurgling
in the liquid lava of my self-perception

crucifixion consequences

chasing pretty

Content Warning: fatphobia, body dysmorphia, eating disorder

the truth is
 i do want to be skinnier
 i want to be like the pretty idols,
 fearless and flawless on stage,
 magnetizing awe into their bodies
 exuding beauty in every sway and gaze
 i want my arms to be thin
 with no monstrous swinging fat underneath,
 expunging the troll from under the bridge
 i want my stomach to be slender
 like an elongated hourglass
 where my time as beautiful doesn't end
 i want my legs to be longer and leaner
 like taffy stretched out as it's made
 and my thighs are just enough sumptuous
 i want my face to be small and chiseled
 like a carved spearhead of an arrow
 ready to pierce breaths and glances

the truth is
 i want to be skinny
 i want to be skinny
 i want to be skinny

which means the other truth is
 i don't like my body
 i don't like my body
 i don't like my body

and honestly i know that
 i don't need to change
 i don't need to change
 i don't need to change

but my eating disorder and i
 are still chasing pretty

pain(t) stripping*Content Warning: body dysmorphia*

loneliness and self-doubt are pungent paint strippers,
 curling and furling in the air as they peel away
 the indulgences
 the escapism
 the temptations
 the ephemerality

down to the bone,
 what is left of me?
 what is behind those
 temporary layers?
 is there substance?
 or is it just
 empty?

my heart is scrubbed raw—
 cracked and dry,
 chapped with uncertainty,
 frostbitten from solitude.
 i can't help but pick at it
 even though i should just
 let it be
 and let it heal.

if i sit in front of the mirror,
 knees drawn up
 because i can't dare
 to take up more space,
 what do i see behind
 those eyes of mine?
 if i search in those irises,
 will i come up with nothing
 or will i discover treasures
 hidden in forgotten corners?

my hope is strained like my smile,
 and my body is taut
 from being overstretched
 in trying to be pretty.
 insufficiency bleeds in bruises,
 burst capillaries of confidence

from my own brutal self-abuse.
 my skin is quick to grow pink
 when i pinch it to see
 just how much more thin i need to be.
 no, maybe it's red—
 a red light i don't listen to
 as i recklessly speed through
 because pretty and skinny demands
 a desperate carelessness
 for the dangerous exhilaration
 of acceptance and admiration.

but when finally alone at home,
 engine silent and going nowhere,
 what is left over?
 in the void by myself,
 i am still not pretty enough,
 i am still not happy enough
 i am still not sure enough.
 in the leftovers of my masked façade,
 my life feels too bare.
 paint strippers give you a blank canvas,
 but too much can leave behind a hole.

stormy winds

nails biting into my skin.
 they pull out blood,
 pulsing vibrating screaming.
 hot anger shreds my cheeks.
 i am jagged x's and indented scribbles.
 my chest is taut with fury.
 my clenched jaw grinds my peace away.
 i'd like to slam my fist
 into your obnoxious throat
 so you can feel the same drowning gurgling
 you've made me endure.

vitriol scorches my skin
 from the inside out.
 nothing
 nothing seems

to be going well.
 my body runs ragged.
 my heart slumps.
 school drags me
 through the mud.
 i am caked in despair,
 body limp with defeat.
 i don't know
 if i can do this.

every little thing
 tests my nerves.
 i am a ravaging savage
 who will tear you apart
 at a single sound.
 inconveniences are deadly
 when i am already
 at my wit's end.
 no one understands
 how far gone i am.
 no one understands
 where i am
 in the abyss of falling.

my tears fall upward
 because i don't get the luxury
 of feeling them for long
 as i plummet.
 it is lonely
 in the air like this.

monthly expiration date

Content Warning: suicidal ideation

it's that time of the month where i pray for a reason,
 a sign that tells me i need to live.
 desperate longing mingles with scatterbrained trembling.
i don't know if i can do this i don't know if i can do this.
 banished in the territory of the unknown,
 i am where no one shows up here and maybe it's better that way
 because i would like to be alone and cold
 and stone and mold and rolled and rolled.

my heart is rotting from the inside out,
crumbling away from its disgusting festering.
but it's stuck in the back of the fridge where no one looks
so it's frozen in time in a soulless mortuary,
watching as everyone forgets it is there.
a sickening nausea of melancholy snakes up my throat:
everything is wrong, nothing is right,
and i cannot stop spiraling into a flightless fight,
a blightful light, a crying kite, a sighing sight.
loneliness chews me up and spits me out
because even i am too sour with sadness for its taste.
i'm shivering, but why does my heart burn so?
even curling up in bed does not stop the frozen flashfire
incinerating my nerves and dragging me to the lost and not found.
just end it all, just toss me into the garbage where
i can be taken away to the dumpster and reek my polluted stench
and my foul anger and my teary isolation.
every month, i go bad like this—
an expiration date for myself
before i curdle and make you sick.

calculated calamity

holes through the red lanterns (fired off)

Content Warning: graphic gun violence, death, Monterey Park mass shooting⁴, white supremacy, anti-Asian racism

nausea rolls through my stomach,
probably like how that shooter rolled up in his car
with his machine gun
and back-up ammo.
sickening—
lurching—
incomprehensible.

tears prick my eyes:
liquid blood
as flashes of images play back—
a twisted corpse on the ground,
sirens sobbing and weariness wailing.
i saw a body under a white fabric
as it entered the ambulance,
and i am crashed, overturned, undone
when i think about how
they probably danced into
our lunar new year
only to have their beginning
turned into an end.

the shooter is still at large,
and their motives are unknown—
or are they?
the day of a lunar new year celebration,
at a dance studio in a town with
a large Asian community—
let me spell it out for you:
anti-Asian racism,
xenophobia,
white supremacy.

Monterey Park, CA,

⁴ The Monterey Park mass shooting happened on January 21, 2023, on the first day of the Lunar New Year, at a ballroom dance studio popular amongst older Asian Americans in a majority Asian town, killing 11 people (Lin et al., 2023). Because of its time, place, Asian perpetrator, and majority Asian victims, the shooting showcases anti-Asian racism in service of white supremacy.

just south of where i've grown up,
 and as those people died
 from the ammunition of hatred embodied,
 my family sent me pictures
 of their Chinese New Year feast,
 and i can recall all the years
 of celebration and red envelopes.
 but now all that luck has been
 dashed, torn, stained.

but this isn't the first
 or the last—
 i remember
 the anonymized 18 year old who was stabbed
 repeatedly in the head on the bus
 just for being Asian.
 i remember
 Michelle Alyssa Go,
 the woman who got pushed
 into the subway tracks
 just for being Asian.
 i remember
 Xiaojie Tan,
 Daoyou Feng,
 Hyun Jung Grant,
 Suncha Kim,
 Soon Chung Park,
 Yong Ae Yue,
 the massage workers who were targeted
 in their place of work
 just for being Asian.

in the silence and lack of justice,
 i see the shockwaves jolt our community
 just as gun violence has shaken
 other marginalized communities,
 and i wonder how many times
 we need to experience high magnitude crises,
 how many peaces must be destroyed,
 how many people must be killed,
 for politicians to actually
 use their power to protect people.

breaking news:

anti-Asian racism is fired off once again,
 ripping holes through the red lanterns
 we thought would ward away demons and ghosts.
 our red envelopes bleed death instead of luck.
 our red celebration outfits will morph into
 black mourning and overhanging devastation.
 once again, racism has taken
 so much from us.

drip sadness

Content Warning: death

he looks like my dad
 in his picture for his gofundme
 asking for funeral donations,
 and i think about
 how he tried to stop
 all this violence from happening,
 and because he
 cared
 he ended up
 gone

in the library
 where feelings aren't allowed,
 i want to drip sadness
 and melt into grief
 and freeze into numbness
 because i can't think
 of a world
 where my dad isn't here,
 so why was he
 taken too?

i want to curl up
 and hide
 where these guns
 and knives won't find
 me and my kin

shot me too (cry with me)

Content Warning: graphic gun violence, Half Moon Bay mass shooting⁵, white supremacy, anti-Asian racism

in the dim lighting of trying to process
 anti-Asian violence not even 72 hours ago,
 i see the news of a mass shooting
 in my precious Half Moon Bay
 slice across my vision,
 and just like that
 i tumble apart at the seams

everything in me spills out
 and i am a mess with unrest,
 tears uncapped, falling down—
 they spell through crowds:
 how? how? how?

the town that took me in secondhand
 as i moved around the Bay
 and that became the rendezvous
 of me and my Burmese Buddhist kin,
 the space where i found and fell
 for my Burmese Buddhist partner, Lin—
 how could this happen
 to a place like that?
 you might as well
 have shot me too

here, people walk on
 as if my world hasn't been rupturing
 from the ground up—
 i'm shut away in my room
 where no one asks
 how i am doing,
 even though i leave
 my tear stains all over the internet

please,

⁵ The Half Moon Bay mass shooting occurred on January 23, 2023, just 2 days after the Monterey Park mass shooting, killing 7 people— 5 of which were Chinese farmworkers (Eby, 2023). Due to this shooting also having an Asian perpetrator and majority Asian victims—as well as its proximity to the violent Monterey Park shooting that occurred less than 72 hours before—the event deeply shook the Asian community.

i just want some company
 to cry with me
 as i cry my insides out.
 this is just
 too much

proximity impaling

Content Warning: graphic gun violence, death, Half Moon Bay mass shooting, white supremacy, anti-Asian racism

1.3 miles from my sanctuary,
 my Burmese Buddhist monastery,
 Chinese farmworkers were shot
 and murdered
 by their Chinese coworker,
 and my Chinese-Burmese self
 is gashed and gasping
 for air that it cannot find
 a few miles from
 the place i grew up,
 the place i first found community,
 the place i first belonged,
 the place i found unconditional love,
 the place i found pure togetherness—
 how could my precious place
 be a witness to this violence?
 the proximity impales me
 because my kin and i
 have driven down that road
 infinite times,
 passed that place
 infinite times,
 and i don't know
 how such violence
 could happen to
 my communities
 so many times over
 i don't want your paper prayers
 and your empty, posturing policies—
 i want peace and political uprising
 and accompaniment—
 please

please
please

unbrief grief-stricken creek

the chill bites me
and brushes past
the gaping wound
on my chest,
making it sting
with disbelief

my limbs
weigh me down—
was moving
always this hard?
my light tan skin
stays pale
in the closed curtain
grief

the roaring river
of emotions
has been dammed up
because that's how
racial violence
cements into barricades
and tears me up,
shuts me up,
fucks me up

how do you carry
on with yourself
in routine
when lives
like yours
are ripped away,
mocked,
and shoved aside?

i'm alone in this
unbrief grief-stricken creek

and the sadness
makes me shiver,
but it's not enough
heat to make me
okay again

i cannot find
my heart anywhere
in the soot and ashes
of my Asianness

human erosion

autistic ai

my body aches with “i can’t”
 as i crawl out of bed
 and turn my joints into cogs,
 my blood into oil,
 my skin into metal.
 i am artificial intelligence,
 faking my walk
 and tuning my talk
 so people will listen to me.

but as much as i’ve perfected
 how to bypass the human algorithm,
 that is not without losing
 some nuts and bolts along the way.
 sounds and social cacophony
 unhinge my screws
 and rattle me inside,
 like a chainsaw chopping down my bones
 sandpaper gnawing at my nerves,
 blowtorch curling my blood—
 demolition implodes inside
 while bystanders carry on.

i am a hoax hurrying on,
 carefully cracking my costume in place,
 even when i know that sooner or later
 this engine will fail me
 and i cannot pretend
 all of my internal undoing
 doesn’t affect me.
 when i am just a pile of springs and washers,
 willpower will not be enough
 to put me back together again.

sleep drowning

familiar heavy eyelids ache
 eroded caverns under my irises
 but i’m afraid

to let sleep sweep me in
because when the blackout fades
i will wake
to tense self-hatred
and self-doubt
fear will tie me
too close to the ground
a different gravity that makes my steps
heavier and slower
when it's just me
it's no good
because i just erode
whatever's holding me up

i'm not sure
when the water got so acidic
something's in the water
something's in the water
i am clinging for dear life
predators chase me
as i tread
measly buoys dunk me still
i get enveloped by waves
no escape no escape
air leaves me too
liquid burns my throat
my lungs flood
my heart goes erratic
my limbs get tired
so i close my eyes
and cannot muster up
energy to open them again

sleep is a cruel trick
that seems like
a respite from pain
but there i am
on the shore
coughing and coughing
wondering why
why why why
i'm even here

dark dark dark

fizzle me out like a bonfire that needed to shush—
 sparks that fade away and forget into black,
 nothingness that cannot be named,
 a bareness of bones that cracks with smoky salt.
 no stars, no moon, no lighthouses or lampposts—
 i am dug deep into the soil of murky fogged air,
 my back against something so solemn and silent.
 the hiss of flames being shut up and smothered
 makes me wince and wonder if my life is that ephemeral—
 what good is a fire once it's gone?

remind me how i needed to go somewhere else but here,
 that my feet cannot plant where they are
 because there is something beyond this opaqueness,
 but i am reveled, wooed, entranced by the cover
 of night that tempts me with his sultry unknown.
 take me into your arms where i can cower and shy,
 caress my face with lies and a false promise of future,
 stroke my whims into ecstasy, making me believe
 and live and live and live.

if you hold my hands, does that mean i won't float away?
 but my mind is already gone and i'm not sure
 what shell you're seeing right now and what that means.
 cross me out like mistaken words and play with my pretenses
 because i can't shape shift into the message i want.
 an ache drives into me, a frosty longing that chills my blood.
 no explanation, no rationale, just a sense that i'm gone,
 behind, lost, in the rearview mirror that wasn't checked.

something puppeteers my chest to rise and fall like tides
 but the ocean must get tired of coming up to the sand, right?
 it must yearn for a different sight, for a different night.
 i know because they tell me when they kiss my toes
 and smooth out the sand from under my feet
 as they recede back into the abyss i can't ever meet.

can't get shit right

Content warning: eating disorder, body dysmorphia

it's 6:36 am and i'm not in bed like i should be.
 from 9:30 to 11 pm, i took a nap like it was a languid sunday afternoon
 even though it was a thursday evening where everyone else
 started winding down like the good people they are.
 instead of recharging, i get lost in ephemerally amusing internet clips
 of cute characters and baby animals and pop culture references
 because even brief moments of laughter are a respite still.
 but i have an 11 am meeting tomorrow and i will get less
 than 5 hours of sleep because even after 26 years of living
 i cannot get shit right.

even after being probably the skinniest i've ever been,
 i still frown at myself in the mirror and pinch myself where i am too much,
 so disappointed that i am too real and too imperfect and that
 i cannot get shit right.

even after multitudes of friendships from lighthearted to unspoken sisterhood,
 i still am alone at 6:45 am night-mornings writing poems i don't share,
 listening to sad taylor swift songs so my melancholy is accompanied even when
 i cannot get shit right.

even after decades of schooling and writing essays and discussing,
 i clutch my words to my chest like secrets i'm not confident in admitting,
 nervously creasing the pages of my thoughts so they don't disappear while
 i cannot get shit right.

even when i was born, my amblyopia meant i saw more out of my left eye
 and it wasn't until i was 5 that everyone discovered my vision was skewed.
 not even i knew that i saw things differently and that from the start
 i couldn't get shit right.

it's nearly 7 am, which has become my new bedtime even though
 i don't claim to be a night owl and i'm just a crumbling, mentally ill, autistic girl.
 geese honk outside as if to signal that my body is on the wrong time,
 and that my mind has been incorrectly intertwined somewhere inside.
 tomorrow i will wake up at 10:55 am before my meeting and pretend
 that i am not tired and that i'm not doing that bad actually
 even though the world seems to speak in grayscale
 and my fingers are devoid of human warmth.

just kidding, i'm not such a good actress so i will probably just
 collapse into dust right there at 11 am in the morning
 because i don't know how to get shit right.

not even sediment

hollow

in my pajamas
heartbroken
maybe lifebroken
there's all these steps
in front of me
but i don't want to go up
my legs are too heavy

glitter seems fake
the air is ghostly
my heart is mechanical
i don't know where feeling is
how do i come back
through the wall
solitary confinement everywhere

i ask for a sign
that i should stay around
something good to happen
my expectations need to
evaporate
i can't count on serendipity
but i can't count on me either
because i don't want to move

this shit is tiring
my spirit is parched
it's too hot for me
i'm sticky with disappointment
wandering
wandering
i don't know if i've gone
anywhere or not

hollow
hollow
it's me
who is this?
whom am i speaking to?

cyclical hollows

words dry up on my tongue like wilted flowers in the vase neglected on the dresser
 letters stutter out like stumbling steps after becoming a desiccated spirit
 barely out the doors of my tonsils, they're knocking and tripping on the way outside
 tears slide my face like rain on the windowpane: transparent, loud, invisible
 inside me is hollow, a house that hasn't held home in however long
 shattered glass snaps under the soles of my feet and pierces me
 because i cannot recognize myself in the reflections of shards and dust
 my heart groans like a heater that can't quite turn on
 and the water in me is rusty and turns my tears auburn red
 because that's what happens when it's alone for too long
i can't write i can't write i can't write
 somehow i am stuck on the stairs on the fourth step up
i'm not right i'm not right i'm not right
 i crumple myself into a ball
 and throw myself away

dust accumulates in my creases and tears
no one hears no one hears no one hears
 the air in me is stale and cold, forgotten and droll
no one's here no one's here no one's here
 i'm still but the world is shaking spinning whirling
 and i am a child again, trapped while life runs around me
 and all i can do is collapse and cry
 because i don't know where to go
 i don't i don't i don't
 because when the mirage lifts and the attention fades
 i'm left with the trepidation in my eyes
 and the hesitation in my breath
 and now i have nothing left

i'm not skinny or pretty or enticing
 i'm not awarded or sufficient or captivating
 what is the meaning what is the meaning
 i'm here for us, but where do i go?
 tell me how i can remember the way
 courage burned in my belly and quaked with resolve
 tell me how i get up on the stairs
 how i smooth out the creases i folded in my heart
 how i fill in the crevices and stop running
 from feedback and mental monsters and

constructed catastrophes
 when do i get to stop hating myself?
 how do i take baby steps and be okay
 when i crash on the ground again?

i'd like to live but i think melting out of sight
 is the only thing i can do with these sighs.
 i cannot face the disparities, the lack of me
 i cannot face the fear, the loneliness, the frustration.
 i cannot face the dearth of belief in me.
 i kill myself slowly with expectations and judgment
 please don't find my corpse afterward
 because it will be festering,
 long lost in the woods
 where houses are caving in like me,
 desolate, abandoned, forgotten.

orthorexia the rat

Content Warning: eating disorder

orthorexia sneaks back up
 like a rat in the wall,
 desperately waiting
 for something it can consume

and i don't hate it
 for that
 because
 it is just trying
 to survive
 in this
 oppressive world

i don't know
 how to tell it
 that i cannot
 let it live here
 with me—
 last time
 it chewed through
 too many
 of my walls

and left me open
to cold hard hate

so it just
gazes at me,
hungry eyes gleaning,
and i am so conscious
to not drop any crumbs
and give it reason
to stay,
but when
i look at myself
in the mirror,
i remember
how i left
feasts on the floor

with myself
in my hands,
i am terrified
to drop anything

pink pain

Content Warning: eating disorder, body dysmorphia, fatphobia, dermatillomania

pink pocks my skin
from pinch pinch pinching
pick pick picking
pink pink pink
pain

measuring the fat
on my limbs,
seeing how much
of myself
i need to lose
so i can
be sexily shrunken
and take up
the right amount
of space
for once

pinch
 pinch
 pick
 pick

lumps and bumps—
 unevenness
 in my body's landscape,
 so let me just
 steamroll
 excavate
 and smooth it out
 even when
 my self-hatred
 seeps into the soil

pick
 pick
 pinch
 pinch

pink mars
 the surface of me,
 marking exactly
 where i punished
 my bodymind
 for being
 predispositioned
 poorly,
 reprimanding me
 because pretty is
 not in my possession

pick
 pinch
 pick
 pinch
 pink
 pink
 pink
 pain
 pain
 pain

forgiveness in infertile places

body keeper

Content Warning: body dysmorphia, fatphobia, dermatillomania

i dug pits in my skin to bury myself in—
 the me who had bumps like hellscape mountain ranges,
 the me whose curves were unruly and out of place,
 the me who could not look like picturesque Pinterest angelics.

so instead of orchards, i planted angry scarlet welts.
 my body became an unkept graveyard
 where i threw my corpses, one after another.
 kill that part and that part and that part
 because she is too wrong to live.

i bled like fruits seeped juice when they rotted,
 and the faded maroon bubbling underneath turned brown,
 bruised outlook and hatred seeping in deeper.
 i inflicted my own wear and tear with carved indents,
 branding me with my self-torment and dissatisfaction.

i was marbled with cruel, clawing cadavers
 rising out of their graves to ask me
 why, oh why, did i do this to them?

and then over time i stopped trying to be their keeper
 and i tried to learn how to stop bringing my bodies here.
 instead of a shovel, i tried to bring flowers to their tombstones
 and sit on the newly seeded grass next to them
 as i wait for them to ruffle my hair with a breeze
 and someday forgive me for what i'd done.

arrange me into a bouquet like her (fat (as) free)

Content Warning: fatphobia, body dysmorphia

i wonder where she finds liberation
 if they are not in her love handles.
 does the lack of fat on her belly
 mean she is constantly cold?
 what kind of ideals does she consume
 on the day-to-day of
 who she's allowed to be

so that she looks like
the sort of doll all the people want?

her eyes are upturned like mine—
how nice it is to be represented.
her nose isn't sharp—
more rounded like mine.
but i wonder why
my eyes don't have
the bambi effect that hers do
and why my nose
isn't quite as cute.

her collarbones jut out
from her thin, straight shoulders—
i know that mine hide
under the roundness of my own.
i feel like a paper cut-out
that wasn't quite
whittled down the right way.
the softness of my torso
seems to fall on the wrong side
because instead of adorable,
i am just invisible.

her face is small, like it was painted
and her eyelashes bloom out
like petals of an engineered flower.
nevertheless, i wish
that someone could cut me up
and arrange me into
a bouquet that stunning,
even if it meant
losing my leaves and thorns
and buds along the way.

she is the me that i can never be,
the person i imagine if i called on surgery,
the ideal that succeeds with hot glory,
the trophy i get if i make me fat free.
but my short legs are not meant
to be stretched out by my decree,
and my cheeks will not shrink down
even if i wipe its genetic memory,

and my thighs will stay thick
in spite of my vile fatphobic dreams.

mirror mirror on the wall,
how do i tell the me in the mirror
to pick up my call,
to not fall
for the walls caving in
when i ask for beauty
and the impossibility to be thin
and that the enemy
is not me?

how do i fall into
fat as free,
fat as free,
fat as free?

b o d y c a c o p h o n y

Content Warning: eating disorder, body dysmorphia, fatphobia

svelte curves
 sensuously
 sing
 on
the screen
but when i look at my body i see
 a c a c o p h o n y
 of i n-
 -cor r ec t
 and
 sc r ee ch-
 -in g.

how i want to be them
with long limbs
and heart-stopping features,
of crooning beauty
and perfect pitch flawless.
i am no model though
and i'm not sure my daintiness is placed
where they're

supposed
to be.

you offer me recovery in a bottle:
drink this and you'll feel better.
but i don't know if i want my noise
to be

swallowed
by

your
prescription—

you seem like you're selling a hoax—

do you know that?

are you actually a quack?

because my eating disorder is not
an ache you can take a painkiller for,
a flu you can take a vaccine for,
an infection you can take antibiotics for.

you cock your head to the side.
but don't you want to get better?

i stare back and cock my head too
(i will not go into a one-on-one duel
with nothing in my holster).

my eyes narrow
and my hands steady
as my voice levels out:
“better for me
doesn't mean
eradicating
a part of me.”

i see you roll your eyes subtly
and your exhale tells me
i'm out of my mind,
at least to you.

you don't grasp where i am
so you put your words back
and walk back to your white crew,
leaving me
alone
in the dust
and the sweltering sun.

in the reflection of the window,
 i spot
 the *au d i t o r y c h a o s*
 of my *b o d y*
 and i pick out
 the off-tune notes
 in my
 f a c e and
 a r m s and
 w a i s t and
 l e g s—
 though i can pretty much do it from memory
 because i
 have practiced
 so much.

i know i will go home
 and try to tune my *b o d y*
 to no avail;
 i know that as much as i wish
 my *b o d y* were a
 longer,
 leaner
 instrument
 it will remain as it is now.

i go
 back
 and
 forth
 on
 grieving
 and
 chasing
 impossible
 music intuition dreams.

yet even in the practices and tunings,
 the frustrations and the yearnings,
 i don't *want* to recover.
 what does that mean
 anyway?
 my *b o d y* is a companion who
 makes noise

and doesn't fit
 in the symphony of normativity or beauty,
 and my eating disorder is her way
 of trying to help
 us
 harmonize
 in this world
 better.
 but won't recovery just mean that
 i forget
 and ignore
 how that orchestra
 was too
 damn
 exclusive
 anyway?
 am i supposed to let go of
 how they
 turned
 me
 away
 with no remorse?

well, i don't buy
 into your quick-fix medicine
 and your power-hungry white believers
 who try to sell and pour your artificial "recovery"
 down
 our
 healing
 throats.

i'm going to go
 make more noise now
and
 make my own peace with
 the practices that won't ever end
 and the fantasies i'll never be—
 at least i'll get to see
 some wickedly
outrageous sound.

plunging ascension

disabled jetlag

baggage under my eyes weighs over 50 pounds—
 i guess disabled exhaustion is too oversized,
 so i pay extra to take my dense shit with me
 even though it's not my fault
 that what i carry is so heavy.

headphones aren't enough to block out the world:
 demanding, requiring, qualifying—
 but i just want to close my eyes
 and tune out everyone's cacophonous noise
 that won't process smoothly in my head anyway.

the autistic urge to take shelter in bed overwhelms me,
 but i draw on a smile as i go through security,
 as all my items are scanned for threats
 and liquid unpermissions.
 i feel my brain battery drain a little more
 as my ocd quadruple checks i have everything
 as i leave to find the take-off destination.

adrenaline and anxiety keep me upright,
 fear pulsing through my fingertips
 and convulsing energy through me
 even as i could topple over and lie sprawling
 on the linoleum ground where
 my cause of death is "too disabled."

my scalp itches with sensory annoyance,
 oily bangs sticking to my forehead
 and clumping because they are overdue
 for some care like me.
 but i don't have time for that right now,
 so i pretend my dirty hair
 doesn't feel like a cheap wig that i want to rip off.

at the gate, i slump into a seat
 and temporarily remove my school backpack,
 but the ache of overhanging work
 has indented into my shoulders
 and the reprieve feels hollow.

deadlines loom around me like night fog—
 maybe i am the kind of plane
 that will crash alone in clouds.

time lingers on as i wait to go home—
 these damn airport seats are uncomfortable on purpose,
 arm rests a disguised barrier to prevent sleeping.
 i don't pray for a safe flight;
 i pray i can muster up the energy
 to withstand time,
 to still breathe even with the load on me,
 to make it home with pride
 that i made the journey.

pmdd's visits (she's complicated)

Content Warning: suicidal ideation

every month she visits with gloom and not wanting to be here—
 you could say that she's a little different from the norm.
 she's sporadic, so she's not quite on time, really.
 and when she comes and stays, she squeezes me so hard
 that it hurts and my chest tightens up and my heart feels
 constricted and lost in the abyss and floating out there where
 no one knows because she is good at hiding from it all.
 she sits on my shoulders and she whispers existential dread,
 humming questions of i should even be here anymore
 to the tune of "what's the point" and "why is everyone ignoring me."
 she doesn't mean to, but she makes the melancholy melody
 cycle through my head like a song i didn't want to hear.
 and somehow when she's here, i forget what i look forward to
 because she pads me up so much that my joy is muffled.
 i don't remember where i was going or why—
 she's so enticing that my words follow her and don't stop
 at the cliff's edge or the tidal wave crests or starboard side.
 she takes her magnifier and zooms in on all my feelings,
 and today she has decided she will amplify the smudged out
 loneliness i tried to hide under my all caps texts and carrying on.
 it's funny that she's so loud even though i'm on lexipro,
 but i guess she's an unstoppable force that won't stop returning.
 am i supposed to hate her? i'm not so sure because
 she's life and me and what's to be expected and that's just it.
 then when she says her see you later's and leaves,

the world turns technicolor with velvet possibilities,
 and i don't know if i'd ever get that without her coming around.
 maybe it hurts and is uncomfortable and makes me
 doubt my existence and be unable to see my life from tomorrow on,
 but when she comes by and makes me feel like i've lost it,
 i feel like i've seen the periphery of the world and come back,
 and even with the heartache, i can't hate her like that.

days of a cave dweller

my room has bags of laundry slouched over
 next to luggage that have laid there for weeks;
 recyclables are the moss growing
 between the edges of my floor and wall.
 my room is a cave with a bed for a burrow,
 and i hide and hibernate here year-round.

it's been days since i've trekked beyond it,
 even to just pick up nearby supplies.
 i feel content with the breeze that
 occasionally visits me at sunset,
 and i am okay with being alone in the dark—
 at least most of the time.

but sometimes the cave air is stifling,
 and my muscles ache from the stillness.
 life doesn't stop for me either
 so my stomach groans
 and my dreams need more kindling.
 these days i haven't had it in me
 to scavenge and gather a lot—
 it is almost the summer but
 i am so sleepy already.

my body insists on living though
 and my ambitions' glow flickers.
 so i hobble onto my feet
 and step outside the cave walls
 to find what i need
 to keep on going.

power(less)

trepidation

i'm scared

i'm tired

i don't want to do this

cliff's edge

narrow footing

sharp unforgiving fall

i'm scared

i'm scared

i'm scared

but i

i don't want to be powerless

anymore

i

i don't want

to be stuck here

treacherous waves

jagged winds

i cannot depend

on miracles

to save me

breath hitched

knees trembling

tears spilling

i'm scared

i'm scared

i'm scared

but i must

move forward

shuffling

pressed against rock

inch by inch

i forge ahead

taking me in

shored up

washed up ashore, i am bleary-eyed as seawater strangles my lungs.
 the space above me reigns lead gray and i am in somewhere else
 that does not care to shower sunlight onto my shivering, sad skin.
 on the edge of the peninsula, it is a desert because that's the site
 where i have been left behind as tides roll in and passersby
 don't even wave good-bye because i am a beached whale that
 has been left to die.
 my eyelashes drip with condensation of saltwater woes,
 and i cough and hack as the ocean tries to riot out of me.
 my toes my fingers my lips have gone blue blue blue
 and the biting numbness reminds me loneliness feels like dying from frostbite.
 no one is here to resuscitate my shriveled-up body
 and i'm not sure why i'm trying to come back to life anyway.
 i almost let myself get swept back into the sea
 but i feel the weight of seashells
 that my kin and i collected
 together in the sun.
 waves crash together and seem welcoming for world-departing,
 and i can spot my capsized sailboat off in the distance.
 my throat aches with the saltwater from me and the ocean,
 and my body moans out of sore sorrow.
 but i sit upright anyway
 and slowly step toward the harbor
 where more sailboats float and wait for me
 to get back on and steer at the helm
 so that i can get back out to the horizon
 and join the fleet of ships that are looking for me out there.

the wake of manmade disaster

after a manmade disaster,
 where do we go
 in the debris and devastation
 left in its wake?

i finally step out
 of my battered house
 into the streets
 to see the damage,

now that i can finally
go outside again.
there is shock piled up
on the side of the roads,
and joy has been swept away
by the brutal wind of grief.
branches of bereavement
have snapped off our family trees,
and some family trees
have fallen altogether,
making it hard
to get to hope.

the sky is slate silver,
the color of tombstones,
and the shattered security
and splintered structures
of our communities
are strewn across the streets
like a desecrated sanctuary.

but on the sidewalk,
my loved ones show up
and hold my hands
as we walk together
down memorial lane
and i cry while i talk
about the details
and the meaning
and why it hurts so much.

it's not so safe out here
(maybe it never really was),
but in the wake of crisis
that our society has created,
i am carried to shore
by people who
understand and listen
hold and love
me
and all my politics
and all my existence.

homeland reunion

more than two decades into my life, i visited my homeland for the first time.
 in the smoggy city of golden pagodas, small side stalls, and british roundabouts,
 i was highlighted in my visitorship:
 light-skinned, american clothes, english accent.
 but with everyone's warm brown skin that had soaked in sun,
 i wished and wished and wished
 that i could just look a little more Burmese.

american currency in my wallet made me a wealthy tourist
 instead of a Burmese returner—
 when people looked at me, they saw east asian and western and well-off
 instead of a Burmese girl who wanted to feel rhythmic Buddhist chants
 and eat the homeland-made cuisine that had cushioned her
 in unwelcome, foreign america.
 the shock rarely left people's first impression
 when they heard my clunky Burmese;
 how is it that even in my homeland
 i cannot belong as i am?

but even though i was not raised there
 or looked like a Burmese person may,
 my loved ones helped me carve a space
 as i returned to my ancestors' days.
 they showed me the famous Shwedagon Pagoda
 where Buddhas sat waiting
 and they gave me their bedding
 and sweet Burmese milk tea with extra milk fat.
 and when i sat on the rooftop overlooking rice paddies
 in this land that i'd not known,
 i felt the grass open its arms
 and invite me in
 so i would remember it always.

their love kindles me to

in the quiet storm of frigid faithlessness,
 i am shredded and swirled around
 by sharp desperation,
 soft treachery,
 silent screams.

blood struggles to sink
into my fingertips,
which turn violet
like a bruise that's
actually not so fresh.

the wind is a harsh critic,
and clouds mob me
so i can't remember
what the sun is supposed to look like.
my skin shivers:
this is slow death,
a pit dug for me,
for people like me.

but even though
the world's gone caucasian white
and my eyelids are shut with ice,
i don't drown in the snow
because i remember.

i remember
the people who gave me love embodied,
who nourished me without faltering,
who caught my tears,
who laughed in pain with me,
who held me in autistic joy,
who fought with me in madness,
who stayed next to me in my cripness.

i remember how they loved me galactically,
how they unwaveringly listened to me,
even when they didn't catch every word;
how they embraced my shaking bodymind,
even when they didn't understand everything;
how they believed in the visions i could paint,
even when they didn't have to leave it to me;
how they had convictions in my needs,
even when they didn't have the full story.

i remember when they surrounded me in love,
when they sacrificed their ease and time
for a new realm of possibility for me,

for a life where i could breathe unimaginable dreams;
 when they brought me into all sorts of circles
 for overlapping, unspoken intimacy
 in our ethnicity and beliefs and ways of being;
 when they welcomed me into their movement
 as a frictionless existence who belonged
 and a celebrated, worthy, and adored presence.

i remember what they encapsulated in the love
 that lives all throughout my bodymind—
 airy, buoyant, raucous laughter in my lungs
 mixed in with sturdy conviction in my feet.
 inhaling is their generous, spacious allowance,
 extended into their adrenaline excitement
 that animates my daring, revolutionary neurons.
 their fierce protection of me is in my clenched fists
 and my interrogative, shaky voice,
 and their soothing, gentle comfort
 is in my tender lips i stop biting away at.
 their certainty and confidence in me live
 as the starriness in my shimmering eyes.

blizzards don't stop because i ask them to,
 and i know the world is okay if i waste away here.
 but i trudge through,
 remembering who has loved me so
 because i want to return
 whatever i can give them for keeping me here,
 for making a microcosm where i am safe
 and deserving unconditionally.
 my blood unfreezes—
 i move for reciprocity and expansion,
 for a world where that microcosm is made macro,
 and everyone can find their way through,
 unalone and unafraid.
 because i would do anything
 that their love kindles me to.

tender breaths begin

anxiety stirs me as i fall asleep,
 gently waking me

but has a terrified look in her eyes.
i'm groggy
but lightning strikes my veins
and my heart hyperventilates,
seeing how fear
blankets her face.

when deadlines are on the horizon,
she takes the helm,
ordering the crew to go
full steam ahead.
she chases the promise of treasure
and i lurch on the deck,
seasick and imbalanced.
we are missing the waves.
the ocean breeze
is not even in the background.

she insists on order:
this, then that, then that.
this, she says
as she looks up at me,
is how we will make it.
her small hands tremble
as she boxes in possibilities
into straight lines
and designated destinations.
i want to wipe the sweat
dribbling down her skin,
but she tells me to
follow the order of things.
so i listen
and my hands don't touch her.

when i was younger,
she and i were the same size.
if anything, she felt larger—
she was the boss,
she was unformidable.
i used to resent her.
wasn't it bullying,
her telling me what to do,
her making me live with fear?

but i'm older now and i know better—
she is scared too.
she saw how one wrong move
put myself in jeopardy.
when i look closer,
i see the heaviness under her eyes
and the tightness in her jaw.

i think it is time
for us to burrow into blankets
and seek peace by
the glow of a fire.
i drape the duvet
over my shoulders
and clasp my hands together.
it is okay
to rest, be swept away,
go out of order.
tender breaths begin.

possibilities from a small safe sanctuary

furling what-ifs

what if i'm okay as i am?
 what if i don't need to change my body?
 what if i can do as much as i can
 and then go to sleep lovingly?
 what if i'm not a bad person
 for buying what makes me happy,
 for running away when feeling crappy,
 for imagining a world sweet and sappy?

what if i stop rhyming and making sense?
 what if my lines and thoughts run on and on
 and i take up space like i didn't before
 and i gently rub the back of my soul and tell them
 that they can drop their shoulders now
 and i will make be here to make them feel safer?
 what if i start to believe that not all has gone wrong
 and that things will be okay after all?
 what if i stop hinging my life on results
 and instead sit deep into the process i'm in?

what if i hug my inner critic and bully and perfectionist
 and thank her for trying so hard to help me survive
 and release her because i want to live boldly and softly
 with my inner caregiver and friend and soother?
 what if i take the weight of unattainable expectations
 off my neck and back and unclench unclench unclench—
 letting go into the flow of peace and tenderness and meadows,
 and nesting myself in my hands and seeing me totally?
 what if i blanket myself in my own love and comfort and care
 and validation and relationality and courage and permission?

maybe flowers unfurl when they see the sunlight
 peek through their petals, whispering, "what if?"

tiny red hearts (getting love right)

the first thing i ever drew
 was a tiny red heart,
 and that's the thing

i kept drawing drawing drawing
because i wanted
to get it right

if you look at kindergarten,
first grade, second grade—
there i was,
putting tiny hearts
on landscapes and portraits,
on gifts and cards.
my ocd really wanted to see
a love, an essence
that was right on the mark

i'm not sure why
more people didn't ask me
why there were
so many tiny hearts
peppered across the page;
maybe it's because
if they did ask,
i replied simply
that i just liked them

i can't tell you
that autistic me liked nice numbers
or had to have everything
aligned and designed
(though that was
still sometimes true),
but i wanted to have
the perfect picture,
and i would draw the same heart
dozens of times over
if it meant i'd get
even one that sat just right

it's funny because
of all the gifts and drawings
that i made as a kid,
if someone saw all those hearts,
they'd just see
me give them a lot of love
instead of my failed attempts

to get the exact,
 right kind i imagined.
 isn't it amazing
 that my attempts at tiny hearts
 still showed my affection
 in repetition and care?

i don't draw tiny red hearts
 these days anymore,
 but i suppose you could say
 that i draw on them
 when i try to get
 the words right,
 my feelings right,
 my meaning right.
 i know now that
 perfect doesn't exist
 and as beautiful
 as those tiny red hearts were,
 i also think i am okay
 drawing other things
 and making imperfect scarlet hearts
 that shimmer multitude of hues
 and innumerable truths

i'm all grown up now
 but i think
 those tiny red hearts
 are my autistic youth,
 my disabled routes,
 my communities' fruits.
 i hope i keep trying
 to get love right

to my body

Content Warning: eating disorder, body dysmorphia, fatphobia

my body stares back at me—
 scrutinize my judgment, my dissatisfaction.
 hate me for hating you,
 yell at me for demanding you change,
 scream at me for not caressing you as you are.

i am a bad friend to me.
the curves of my shoulders and arms
and jiggle in my stomach and thighs
read like sketches to be erased,
clay to be discarded.
i have made myself into a project
that won't ever be finished,
that won't ever be sufficient.
but in the kiln, my body breaks
and i cannot see past its pieces.
i am a fool with myopia
in more than just my eyes.
i treat fat like evil i must purge.
i must minimize its plague.
but it is a pillow embodying my softness,
rounding out my harsh edges
and protecting me from this vicious place.
i'm so sorry for treating you badly.
i can't promise i will stop,
but i will try to do it less,
and i will apologize more often when i do.
i'm sorry for hating you.
you have done nothing wrong.
and every day you forgive me anyway.
i hope one day i can love you more fully
and more unconditionally
the way you do for me.

echoing chimes and heartbeats

our millennia-thread-count Buddhist fabric

Content Warning: white supremacy, colonialism, fascism

Buddhism threads itself
 through my veins,
 stitching my character and calling
 with community
 and chants
 and comfort,
 but your white discovery
 tangles and claims
 those threads for yourself—
 you strut around on your white horse,
 trumpeting about how *you* have found
 such an *enlightening* spiritual treasure,
 so listen up.

i stand there as a background object to your colonial monologue—
 you dress yourself in our wisdom
 and exalt yourself with the medal of monkhood
 to turn centuries of sacred culture and beliefs
 into platitudes of self-improvement
 and hollow authenticity.

i roll my eyes as a ghost haunting your celebration
 because your party
 your self-inflated white parade
 is a ritzy robbery
 an exploitation expo
 and a demolition in disguise
 of my Burmese Buddhist world,
 and you look like a fucking fool
 to the people you've swindled.

i squint with disbelief and disdain
 as confetti bestows your shoulders,
 in all your inane white glory—
 on your colonizer soap box
 with our precious
 precepts
 in your Patagonia knapsack.

but just because we share
 doesn't mean
 you fucking claim
 and repackage it
 for your own white capitalistic
 colonizer gain.
 so surprising you weren't *enlightened* on that
 while you were a monk meditating for 6 months,
 you fucking jackass.

i burn down your obnoxious arrogance
 and create ashes for my community and i
 to pray over—
 not for you,
 but for all that was taken from us,
 for all that we have lost
because of you.

i feel my Buddhist existence stitched together
 by a millennia thread count
 of traditions
 and chants
 and community;
 it is held together by millions of threads
 with meditation
 and politics
 intertwined,
 and your
 white
 extracting
 colonizer ways
 do not
 get to tear out
 what you like.
 our fabric is
 too sacred
 to be split like that.

relationally defined as autistic

Content Warning: epistemic violence

the white lady with the columbia msw degree told me

that i wasn't autistic
because it's something relationally determined,
don't you see?
so even as i squirmed on the other side of the screen,
she stuck to her beliefs
that i was just
not enough
too much
to be autistic.
after all, wouldn't the people around me agree?

seems like a catch-22 that i'd have to meet
your definition of socially adjusted
to call myself autistic
when if i've survived this long
by masking and traversing these social seas,
then just how would i be
here standing breathing feeling arguing
with your medically stubborn ass?
surprise:
i didn't get to your office
by pure fucking luck

you're pretty damn infuriating,
did you know that?
because you insist that autism is
relationally defined,
situationally marked,
contextually read,
but you're just some white woman
who thinks you fucking know me
because i decided to share a bit of myself.
who are you to determine who i am?
and how presumptuous are you to think
that anyone in my communities will see me
as deviantly different the way
your colonizer, psy eyes gaze at me
and label that under your diagnosis of white man autism?
because maybe they already embraced me
before you sat down in your cushy therapist chair
with your framed columbia degree
hanging above your ignorant head

i know i am autistic because i know me

and my loved ones take me in stride
 even if they don't know,
 even when i haven't told them;
 they have loved me all the same.
 when i mimic the sounds my brother makes
 or roar-laugh in the echoes of my parents' kitchen,
 my family loved me before and after i called myself autistic—
 when i talked a little too long in cousin conversations
 and put my whole two feet in my mouth,
 my cousins loved me before and after i called myself autistic—
 when i stimmed on my partner's body
 and made my heart the whole damn outfit,
 my partner loved me before and after i called myself autistic

but you're saying that if you interviewed them,
 they would point out my differences?
 they would say i'm socially awkward?
 they would say i stuck out like a sore thumb?
 and that would determine if you agreed that i was autistic?
 what a fucking joke—
 autism is a part of me the way glasses sit on my nose;
 it is the pastel feminine fashion i adorn when i have the energy
 and the scholarly atmosphere i enter when i critically think
 and the scream laughs that erupt when i am lit with joy.
 it defines me, is within me, is through me, is emanating from me;
 it is who i have always been and who i will always be,
 and all the communities who love me have immediately understood that.
 they have understood me as me as me as me,
 however and whichever ways my autism peeked or jumped out,
 so the relational proof you're looking for
 won't be there because it won't be defined
 by the un-belonging you characterize autistic people with.
 my communities made it easy
 to not need to know i was autistic.

the white lady with the columbia msw degree told me
 that i wasn't autistic
 because it's something relationally determined,
 so even as i squirmed on the other side of the screen,
 she stuck to her beliefs
 that i was just
 not enough
 too much
 to be autistic.

after all, wouldn't the people around me agree?
 but no, they wouldn't because frankly
 before and after i called myself autistic
 they carried, embraced, and loved me as me

child-of-immigrant confessions

Content Warning: blood

the truth is i don't know myself after all
 i found out about me through a wikipedia page
 about the history of "Chinese-Burmese"
 (i didn't know we were also called Sino-Burmese)
 and the other day at a family gathering
 my cousin's partner spoke Hokkien
 which is the language of the Chinese province
 my family is apparently from
 why did i never know that?

wikipedia told me that we're an ethnic minority
 but we somehow populated middle class
 and had plenty of doctors and engineers;
 all of a sudden it made sense
 why "Chinese" couldn't tell my whole story

i saw the complications in the hyphen
 of "Chinese-Burmese,"
 laid out right there on the internet
 probably by some white historian.
 we had laws halt us from advanced job entry
 but the paragraphs reeked with privilege still;
 just how messy was i anyway?

but on that page, i saw foods i grew with:

htamin kyaw

pauksi

bèkin

igyakway

san byoke

sigyet khaukswè

and suddenly my existence felt like
 it was real after all

the truth is that i don't talk with my parents
 the way that white people do;
 i don't confide in them
 or problem solve with them
 about my career or dreams.
 i don't ask them to revise my paper
 because i have edited their emails
 more times than i can count.

but i know they will drop it all
 to take care of my health;
 they will take me to the minor injury center
 for a hairline fractured pinky
 or the emergency room
 for mysterious painful bout of gastritis
 and won't bat an eye
 when i vomit blood in our recycling bin.

i know that they will think of me
 when they are in costco,
 wondering if i will like those fluffy socks
 or if i can eat that fruit or not
 with all my fruit allergies,
 and grab my favorite flavor of chips
 even if it's not on sale.

i know they will sit me down
 to talk about my financial state of affairs
 or make sure i think about job benefits
 so that i am all set for the future
 and never have to worry about money
 the way they never made me worry.

the truth is that i don't know myself after all,
 but neither do my parents—
 they don't know how i identify as disabled,
 they don't know how my pronouns are she/they,
 they don't know how i'm bisexual,
 they don't know how i'm politically radical.
 but they love me anyway.
 they so dearly love me anyway.
 so even though i may not know what Hokkien is
 or what the history is behind my Chinese-Burmese ancestry,
 i will still love me dearly.

there i was⁶

Content Warning: ableism, mention of genocide

oasis weeps at the corner of my eyes—
 finally, in the desert of being misunderstood,
 there i was,
 in all my autistic joy and awkwardness
 and scintillation.

she has dark hair and eyes like mine,
 with thick noise-cancelling headphones
 around her head like a soldier's helmet
 so she doesn't get knocked over
 by sensory bullets and social warfare.
 she swims in criminal law like its frictionless—
 it is her ocean that she knows
 all the coral reefs and tides to.
 her love for whales is a bright lighthouse
 whose signal she will revolve endlessly
 because it shows her where to go
 even when the storms make a blackout sky.
 she repeats sounds to understand,
 melts down like a candle if there's
 too much heat from the noise.
 she is perplexed by the revolving doors of the world,
 the contraptions others so easily pass through
 but seem to spin her round and round.
 she knows that less than 80 years ago
 people justified killing people like her,
 and that even now,
 people question if she is worthy of living.

when she said that
 she was no ordinary lawyer,
 that her worthiness was up in the air—
 when she strived for psychological independence
 and bought her dad food for the first time,
 those moments all resonated in my cells,
 millions of bells ringing and clanging

⁶ Poem written in response to Netflix show, *Extraordinary Attorney Woo*, a 2022 Korean drama following an autistic Korean woman's navigation of her lawyer career and budding romance.

because there i was,
 there i was,
 there i was.

autistic love story

you taught me how to kiss
 because i didn't know
 that you don't run your tongue
 over the other person's teeth
 while your lips are locked
 even though the smoothness
 is delightful and delicious.

whenever i left my body behind
 in a short circuit of my self
 and couldn't utter a single syllable,
 you stayed with me through them
 even though silent shutdowns
 were so mysterious to you—
 call it patience and understanding,
 or call it love.

you let me be near you,
 eat what you're eating,
 look at what you're looking at,
 sniff the sweet scent on your skin—
 i just want to wrap myself up in you
 and return to you throughout the day.
 how do i enfold myself into
 your warm chest and soft heart?

as an autistic person,
 i craved love my whole life
 because maybe then
 someone would finally get me.
 i always thought that there was
 just something about me;
 i thought i needed to find the One
 to be complete at last.

but i really just wanted someone

to be in my world as it was,
 to love the me right in front of them,
 to speak my nonsensical phrases
 and call on my autistic logic,
 to mispronounce words
 that made me double over laughing,
 to treat my stuffed animals
 as loyal and comforting friends.

i was already complete
 and just wanted to have
 someone with me,
 and there you have been.
 there you are.

resonating truth⁷

like a bell cling clanging, i ring true
 when i find me and my people painted in portraits
 of the back alley stories and bonfire glows,
 of the dusty tomes and non-puppet shows.

i am a wind chime chanting my harmonious noise
 when i uncover the box holding all
 the butterflies i've tended to
 into the skies where they don't have to apologize
 for their ambitious flight.

i am the reverberation of the canyon cliffside
 when i echo in people's eyes,
 and there we all are in that triumphant shout
 of unapology and defiance and hope.

in our truths, there we are
 there we are
 there we are

⁷ Poem inspired by Zwicky's (1992) analogy that "analysis is a laser; lyric is a bell" (100).

flowering freedom

dressed in collective love (revolutionary hues)

my blue hour ballad crooning floats with the fresh air
as lampposts dim and show us the way again.

my dreams are creamy pastel intimate,
trimmed in dainty lace and accented with knotted bows,
adorned with floral embroidered imaginations and radical ruffles,
anchoring me again to show up in unknown spaces
with a loud, unwavering voice insisting and inviting
even when my core trembles and i perspire uncertainty.

i sail away on the song,
holding onto how it's not about me,
this all isn't about me—
it's that if i don't show up and voice this,
no one else will
even though these lyrics and melodies matter.
i'm not here for me;
i'm here for the communities who cannot be here,
for the communities who sewed together
my daring political wardrobe with me,
every stitch full of unconditional love,
every accessory attached with care.

i am soft in dreams and ballads,
every fiber of me made of the communities
who have stayed and woven love into me.
the cloth of my self isn't painproof,
but it keeps me warm when the sun goes down
and it accompanies me when i'm scared.
it embraces and fits the way i breathe
because my kin made it just for me.

in light peach and spring green,
lavender and butter yellow,
creamy ivory and powder blue,
i am dressed up in collective love
that washes the world in revolutionary hues.

floral politics

my eyes gazed over my computer screen at the wall instead of people's faces,
 not caring to look in their eyes because i don't need to;
 instead, i follow the vines of my monologue thoughts and multichrome cinema.
 i look away to be led by the words that knit up my skin,
 build out my roots and sketch out my stem
 because until my voice rings out like pollen and aromatic calls,
 i had been living a closed flower's life.

nervous morning dew perspires down the petals of my armpits
 but i face up toward the sun and shout out my color,
 put forth my scent and dare to unfurl in the wind and predators.
 the heat in my face doesn't make me turn away
 and i look straight at the sky that challenges me.
 i hold firm in my floral politics that are both loving and thorny—
 i bet you didn't think a soft bud could be so ferocious, did you?

just try to get me with your aphid apolitics and toxic terrors—
 i will not relent, i will not acquiesce, i will not wilt to you.
 try to drown me in stormy realities, but i will still be here—
 try to dry me out of empathy and emotion, but i will still be here—
 try to pull me out from the grounds of my people, but i will still be here.
 you can call me a weed, a wildflower, a flower, a bush,
 a tree, an orchard, a farm, a forest.
 call me what you want, but anyone who appreciates my meaning
 will tend to me and pause to affirm me as i am.
 i am here, open and unbound and courageous and bold,
 and this is the kind of beauty i hold.

somewhere to dance

i'm not good at taking up space,
 so i used to dance within a single square foot—
 that's what society wants anyway,
 is creativity within lines,
 bodies within bounds,
 especially when mine is not the kind it likes:
 indomitable and unrelenting.

i internalized how to show up
 just enough but not too much—

just what kind of shitty alley is that?
 dances are meant to be wherever we want,
 not where you designate them to be.

so i will step
 and roll
 and sway
 all outside the boxes you wrote into me;
 i will make
 mad moves
 that wave
 the west away,
 that sensuously shout
 my shadows,
 that draw the gaze
 of audiences i desire.
 i will throw my arms out wide
 and hold the beat in my eyes
 as i shift the weight of my existence
 from my autistic head
 to my soft heart
 to my fierce fingertips—
 how's that for a body roll?

because my world isn't limited
 to the small square foot you bequeathed me—
 i won't surrender my space
 to this colonizing and prescriptive system
 that punishes us for stepping out of turn
 or judges us for not dancing a certain way.
 i'm not interested in your elitist conditions
 on whom is allowed to dance
 because they will segregate the crowd
 and always leave bodies out
 even though everyone is worthy
 and deserving of that spatial and all-encompassing freedom—
 everyone should get to move how they feel,
 everyone should get to move to their own rhythm,
 everyone should get to rejoice in that collective energy.

there are so many reasons why some don't dance—
 maybe they don't know how,
 maybe they have no one to dance with,
 maybe they are put in boxes too,

maybe they don't have somewhere to move.
but i hope my frenetic shuffling,
my extended exorcism of unnerving norms,
my glittering grin and rosy irises all invite my kin in,
and even if they don't dance,
i hope they can start to see a space where they can.

sweet liberation

maybe my liberation tastes like a korean milk bun,
filled with creamy vanilla bean comfort.
maybe it tastes like chinese mango mousse cake
with a rich yet light fruity layer of hope,
and maybe it's also condensed milk
that sweetens up burmese tea like love,
and it's a japanese milk bread loaf
where it's fluffy with possibility and space to exist.

maybe my liberation tastes best
when i'm eating dessert with everyone else,
and we are all laughing and oohing,
eyes sprung open with the delight
of tinkling sugar dancing in our mouths.

maybe liberation is the meal and the dessert,
and maybe i can have cake
and maybe we can have cake
and we can eat it too.